

Top Leaders' Experiences of Learning

A research project submitted to Middlesex University in Partial Fulfilment of
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Professional Studies.

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In collaboration with

The Professional Development Foundation

September 2014

Word count: 64,641 (excl. references and appendices)

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Abstract

This qualitative grounded theory study explores how ten top leaders experienced their learning, whether there were any commonalities in their learning and how that learning could be applied to leadership development and coaching.

Four military generals, three corporate chief executives and three academic leaders were interviewed on learning experiences that they judged as being influential. These interviews were transcribed and analysed according to social constructivist grounded theory through a process of initial, focused and clustered coding followed by individual theme development and common theme construction. A tentative theory emerged from the data.

At each stage findings were referred back to the ten research participants for their validation. Finally a 'reflective conversation' was held with each leader, during which they were asked to rate the level of their identification with 11 characteristics and tools that were identified from the common themes. The results showed considerable common identification and use across the entire sample.

Findings indicate that, very early in their lives, these top leaders developed a *navigational stance* based on their exploration of early relationships (Bowlby, 1988), which assumes a 'partnering' relationship with their world.

This navigational stance is strengthened by the consistent and compound application of a *navigation template* consisting of 11 identified tools and characteristics. These are: navigation (finding a way through), pragmatism (doing the best possible), three-way challenges, socialised decision-making, no attachment to failure (but to holding accountable), an acute sense of reality (no wishful thinking), holism (seeing linkages within and between contexts), alertness to constituents, a sense of direction (with no dogma), use of mentors and the use of the tools as a composite template.

Three innovative insights emerge: a) that the individuals in this research who go on to be successful organisational heads, experience their relationship with their world as a *manageable partnership* at an early age, b) that because this partnership relationship is perceived to be effective, they reinforce and refine it by the consistent application of a navigation template, and c) that the consistent

application of the navigation template may cause these leaders to be in default transformative learning mode.

The developing theory and model is articulated and applied to leadership coaching.

Acknowledgements

As befits a work that concludes that we are all in partnership with the world, there are a number of partners I acknowledge with gratitude.

Michael Carroll has been my mentor, friend, editor and tireless navigator who first encouraged me to take on this journey and stayed with me throughout. Without the dialogue, his never-ending hazard to my assumptions, his integrity, and his extraordinary openness to learning, this work would have been much poorer. He is, without doubt, the most generous man I have encountered.

My wife, Sibylle, has been my beloved companion, mentor, and challenger who ensured that I stuck to the path while health, bereavements, emigration and life threatened to interfere. She never failed to be astonished that I would even think of despairing. All this while she was writing her own book: an extraordinary woman.

David Lane, my Adviser, understands what all candidates go through long before we know it. He always delivered the clarity and context I needed. And, dear me, did I need it.

Annette Fillery-Travis, a delightful teacher who both helped give me the confidence to start, picked up the phone when I fretted and, through her own work, reminded me of the joy that learning is.

Jacqui Farrants, thank you for the clarity, insight and guidance through the methodology.

Paul Furey, Kate Maguire and Susan Melrose. Your challenges and encouragement in the earlier stages of this work remain much valued.

No less are the friends and companions I encountered as they successfully travelled their own DProf journey: Alison Hodge, Catherine Carr and Jacqueline Peters, thank you for the friendship, discussions, meals and (very) good cheer.

Heather Reimer, who not only transcribed some very long interviews but also immaculately co-ordinated my meetings and calls with research participants, advisers and administrators.

Stephen Watt and Terri Demetriou at the IWBL, when the process and bureaucracy threatened to sink me, they pulled me out. Alan Edwards, at the Library of the University, spent time and patience making sure 4 years of accessing the electronic resources, went without a hitch.

Above all, however, this work has been shaped by a group of individuals I cannot identify but to whom I owe the deepest debt of gratitude. Ten top leaders who gave me their time, candour, reflection, pushback and carefully considered thought over four years, sometimes reminding themselves of periods which caused them discomfort and even unhappiness. Thank you: I am privileged to have worked with you all.

Stephen Barden, September 2014.

Prologue

Anyone looking at the small hatchback bouncing down the dry riverbed may have thought that the driver knew where he was going. After all, it was rattling along at a speed that suggested confidence, certainty and knowledge. But follow the swirl for longer than ten minutes, and you would see the car stop every time the riverbed forked and then, almost ill-manneredly, swing to the left and barrel onwards. The car always took the left for a very good reason: the driver was in a panic and had no idea where the riverbed was leading him. He aimed for the left so that he was in control of something – anything.

In the car were a young man, his wife and their 6-month-old son. They were trying to get back into South Africa without going through a border post. Although they both lived in the country, their son was born of an illegal, interracial marriage and was therefore not registered. This meant he wouldn't be allowed back into South Africa. The dried river, they had been told, was a simple way of getting across.

Everything had gone perfectly for ten minutes. Then the riverbed forked into two equally well-used trails. After a few minutes debate the young man drove to the left. Five kilometres later, it did it again. And again. And again. Worse, it sometimes split into three or four tracks. By this time the young man was raging. His wife fed their son grapes to hide her own anxiety. Then, by an incalculable miracle, the riverbed met the tarred main road inside South Africa – and the rage subsided.

For years, I told that story as a miracle, that somehow – despite not knowing what I was doing – my family and I had been 'delivered' to the road and to safety. Then one day I realised what had happened. The riverbed was, of course, the path of a river. All those trails were part of the same course. So, whichever trail I chose I would have arrived at my destination. If I had trusted the terrain and my previous learning I would have saved us all the fear and the rage that accompanied not knowing.

This research programme is, itself, a story about following trails. Some of them started very early in my life. All of them eventually flowed to this place.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Research area

Three trails or life experiences in particular have led me to this doctorate:

Personal life (the non-finisher)

Corporate life (the corporate leader)

Executive coaching experience (the executive coach)

Each of these experiences has led me to formulate a key question; these three questions together form the basis of this research.

First experience: *The non-finisher*

*First research question: Do leaders learn from pivotal incidents in their lives?
What are their personal experiences of learning?*

Second experience: *The corporate leader*

*Second research question: How do leaders specifically ensure that they
learn and keep on learning about the organisation that they are
leading?*

Third experience: *The executive coach*

*Third research question: Can coaching help and support leaders in their
ongoing learning?*

1.1.1. Do leaders learn from pivotal incidents in their lives? What are their personal experiences of learning?

This research project started nearly 60 years ago with an event that I attributed to the start of my interest in leadership learning. My father made a pronouncement about me that stuck in my four year old head: *"He never finishes anything."* Obediently I became the boy – and later the man – who never finishes anything.

That was the experience by which I chose to define myself for the next six decades. Insignificant outwardly, I saw it as a major internal pivotal event. It helped shape the way I learned, it influenced the selection of my initial career path, and it defined both the locus and the boundaries of my success. Being a 'non-finisher' does not necessarily mean not succeeding; it does mean choosing battlegrounds carefully and being prepared to move on, a lot.

What I lacked in finishing, however, I made up for in being a very strong starter. I intuitively gravitated towards the fast-moving environments of media, theatre and politics hammering on their doors until I was allowed in and accepted. Such environments were clearly created for me; everything moved at a frantic pace and projects were completed quickly.

I was an energetic autodidact. I read, researched and immersed myself in numerous subjects. I was admitted, without a degree, to work on a postgraduate level diploma in Applied Social Science. Of course that was a problem in that it required finishing, so it was almost with relief that the whole thing came to a grinding halt and the decision about finishing or not was made for me. I was detained and then deported by the South African apartheid government as being a danger to the security of the state.

Exile in London presented few problems to the non-finisher. No finishing was required; I climbed up the career ladder through increasingly senior media positions. I did not have to worry about finishing; my job was simply to make sure the system changed, and kept on changing.

I am interested in finding out whether pivotal moments in the life stories of the top leaders I interview will also have a significant impact on their learning and on their leadership style. Were this the case, then executive coaching would be foolish to ignore the power of such notable narratives in the learning lives of executives. Fellow coach Graham Lee has learned this and places the personal experience of the leader at the core of his coaching. "Our styles are unconsciously tailored by the

nuances and contingencies of our personal histories. An examination of personal history provides the coach and managers being coached, with a means to identify those patterns that are effective, and others that are ineffective" (2003, p. 19).

1.1.2. How do leaders specifically ensure that they learn and keep on learning about the organisation that they are leading?

When I started managing companies in sectors other than media I had to make a rapid readjustment. My first CEO appointment was as head of a technology company. It required completion at a number of levels, obviously not the job for a man who never finishes anything. I repositioned myself; I packaged myself as a change agent. I became a chief executive who redesigned, restructured, repositioned – and then moved on.

That worked for over a decade through three companies. Unfortunately the fourth was an organisation that needed more than just repositioning. It required patience, reflection and trust. It needed to experience change under guidance – my guidance. It needed time. It was then that I realised my change agent approach could cause damage.

Throughout this time, I rarely had a clear understanding of how my leadership was viewed by those below me, how the strategy and direction I had set was interpreted, processed, executed or adapted by my colleagues at each level of management. I could see the immediate impact of my leadership practice but it was difficult for me to grasp the detail of my influence. If leadership, in the definition of Pendleton and Furnham (2012), is "to create the conditions for people to thrive, individually and collectively, and achieve significant goals" (*Loc 212 of 4921*) then I was aware of the goals that were being achieved, or not, but less aware of what conditions were being created at the individual or collective level. This is particularly important in environments of change. Robert Burgelman, in a private communication to Argyris (1999) expresses himself with almost as much frustration as I felt:

...it is very difficult for top and middle managers to examine at length what the strategic situation is [that is] faced by an organisation in very dynamic environments. So much is going on simultaneously that the kind of exhaustive 'airing out' of the strategic situation is probably unachievable. (p. 32)

I knew that an essential characteristic of leaders was the ability to know what was going on at all levels in their organisation. How was a leader to lead if he didn't know what he was leading? Welch talks about behaviour in the context of crisis management (2005, pp. 150–151). He lays out three approaches: a) tight financial accounting controls, b) good internal processes in hiring, performance reviews and training programmes, and c) a culture of integrity enforced by zero tolerance to bad behaviour and public vilifications of transgressors.

For me that was not enough. Those three approaches were the threshold to consistency, rather than the solution. Tight controls can always be evaded, particularly by those most familiar with them. Good hires can be blemished by bad management. As for vilification, by the time it is enforced the damage has been done. Worse still, it engenders a climate of fear and fear is bad for business. Welch's approach is what Argyris (2000) describes as a Model I organisation where the so-called governing values, or more accurately, *value imperatives*, are competition, hierarchy, repression and rationality. The problem with Model I organisations is, as Argyris (2000) so elegantly puts it, that they cause, "not only skilled unawareness, but also skilled incompetence" (p.6).

I was also concerned with the maintenance of authenticity and integrity in internal communication; how does a leader ensure that s/he has access to sufficient and authentic information channels on a consistent basis? Many years later, when I was practising as a coach, I wrote about this on my website.

How, as a leader, do I make sure that I am continuously reminded to be in a state of awareness and discovery? What structures and processes do I need to set up? What relationships do I need to develop? What behaviour do I need to display so that my stakeholders can not only challenge me but see it as their duty to do so? And how do I make sure that I and the organisation keep learning? Finally, to return to the ancient Greeks, how do I, like the craftiest of all leaders, Odysseus, make sure that when the sirens of hubris start singing their irresistible song, I am stopped from following them onto the rocks? (Barden, 2011)

Like Odysseus, who learned about himself and his crew and changed and adapted that learning during his sea journey home, effective leaders learn from working with and in their organisations. Leaders ask: what strategies do I have in place in order to continue my learning within this organisation?

1.1.3. Can coaching help and support leaders in their ongoing learning?

Coaching is a reflective space where leaders can review their learning requirements as leaders and engage in a learning journey. I also needed to provide myself with the space to reflect on *my* own behaviour and learning – as individual, as a former corporate leader and as a coach.

During a session in 2008 with my coaching supervisor, Michael Carroll, I started talking about a growing need to validate the learning that I had accumulated throughout my life. Despite my history as a non-finisher I found myself exploring with Michael the possibility of a structured academic programme, which eventually turned out to be this DProf. We had spoken about my pivotal moments so Michael was well aware of my issues around finishing, but this was surprisingly absent from my first attempts to articulate my areas of study. Perhaps some shift had, after all, taken place. One of the fruits of coaching and being coached was the realisation that my learning and my leadership were shaped by the way that I viewed *myself-in-the-world*; that view was shaped by the *never finishes anything* pivotal moment as much as by all the subsequent corporate and leadership experiences I had had.

As coach I was interested in helping other leaders to understand with greater clarity what occurred to them *as human beings* while they were in power. I was interested in the experiences of men and women *while* they were leaders. What were they learning from the job as they were doing the job? What behaviours enabled or inhibited their leadership? What were their perceptions of leadership – their assumptions of what leaders *should* or *ought* to do? How did these assumptions and behaviours distort or complement their leadership? In brief, how did they learn and what did they learn as leaders?

Again and again in my coaching practice I have seen how strategic, behavioural or structural issues within a corporation are affected by the experiences and assumptions of the leader. I have not yet met leaders who resemble what Goleman cheerfully described as “the Dark Triad: narcissists, Machiavellians and psychopaths” (2006, p. 118). However, I have felt the impact of a leader’s personal nuances and contingencies on their decisions, and particularly those made without reflection.

I came to understand that my greatest value to my clients in my leadership coaching practice was in helping them uncover/recover those experiences that shaped their current behaviour – and supporting them to change accordingly. My own corporate history meant that I had a tendency, in my early years of coaching, to look for structure and process. I was initially comforted that much of coaching was centred on well-organised rational processes. Process models of coaching abound ranging from the very pragmatic outcome-focused GROW model (goal, reality, options, will) to the more participatory five-step LASER (learning, assessing, story-making, enabling, reframing) process proposed by Lee (2003, p.60). However, the more I practised as a coach the more I found the process-centred approach problematic. While it may focus efficiently on achieving a short-term performance outcome, it can neglect the unique set of experiences and assumptions of the person who is to *sustain* those outcomes, the client.

Even in O'Neil's (2000) partnership model, the focus remains very much on the present – on this specific situation. In her systemic approach to coaching she points out that "this leader is not overactive in a vacuum; he has help from under-involved members of the team" (p.101). What she does not ask is what it is about this leader that enables, perhaps even encourages, the under-involvement of others? What experience has taught him that his own over-activity is an asset or not as the case may be? If it is seen as a *significant* piece of behaviour it follows that it probably has *significant* value. This narrow approach in time and context may work with performance coaching, but I have reservations as to whether it would enable sustainable leadership development.

The examination of the filters through which both my clients and I learn plays an important role in my coaching. Assumptions are so often the unconscious filters by which we interpret our world. Every day I encounter the danger of making assumptions in coaching; what assumptions am I making about my client's view of the world? What assumptions is my client making about her world, herself and me? Not to deal with the plethora of assumptions swirling around the coaching partnership is to miss an opportunity for sustainable change (namely, the difference between providing a fish, and training others to fish). If I fail to understand the perception filters and assumptions of both myself and my client then I am running the risk of imposing new filters, or colluding with old filters that sustain and embed past behaviours.

Time is limited and the pressure on both leader and coach to deliver results is ever present. Probing too deeply into the formative experiences of clients may be difficult and sometimes not appropriate, especially at the beginning stage of coaching. However, without a deeper understanding, I find myself being more and more short-term goal oriented in my coaching. The dialogue process is certainly enabling greater self-awareness in the clients but I worry that the changes in behaviour I am supporting are short term – reaching only as far as the objectives we have targeted.

In summary, the three questions below form the basis and the end points for my inquiries. They are questions that have resonance and history in my own life and professional career; this research is personal as well as communal. If research is about discovering, and 'uncovering' what is already there, then my intention is to trace the learning journeys of top leaders as they recall and narrate those journeys. I do this in the hope that they will give me, and the profession of coaching, insights into how to be a more effective executive coach.

First research question: **Do leaders learn from pivotal incidents in their lives? What are their personal experiences of learning?**

Second research question: **How do leaders specifically ensure that they learn and keep on learning about the organisation that they are leading?**

Third research question: **Can coaching help and support leaders in their learning?**

1.2. Research focus

1.2.1. Accessing the personal learning experiences of top-level leaders

My coaching practice specialises in working with corporate leaders (and sometimes their teams), who have, or aspire to have, overall authority in their organisations. Most of these individuals have significant experience and skills.

Leaders set out to meet specific challenges, and it is important they do so with the holistic consistency in leadership behaviour that a complex organisation requires. Although my clients are prepared to be more reflective through coaching, they still

have limited time at their disposal. At this level, my job as coach–mentor is not necessarily to enable behavioural change but to help maximise and maintain their efficacy as leaders. So it is as important to understand both the strengths that have brought them to their senior role, as well as the flaws that might topple them from it. This requires a holistic approach in which the perceptions and the assumptions of the leader are sharply in the foreground of my work. I ask them to understand their relationship with the world, and their assumptions about it.

It is these considerations that have led to the research focus of this project. There is no doubt that an individual cannot singly lead a modern, complex organisation. However, there is significant evidence that the individual who is *characterised* as the top leader exercises enormous influence on the vision, behaviour and culture of those organisations. A notable example is the election (2013) of a new ‘CEO’ of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis. Within weeks his influence throughout the whole organisation, and beyond, was apparent. His behaviour has set off a chain reaction. I was confronted with this issue in my own career as CEO. My shareholders, on discovering poor behaviour by one of my executive directors, wanted to know “what is it about your behaviour that makes him think he has permission to act in this way?” (Barden, 2011). A wise comment from a systemic viewpoint and a realisation that what I was doing as leader influenced the conduct of those I was leading.

If top-level leaders are such significant influencers – an ability they have brought with them from their own learning experiences – what added value can the coach–mentor bring? One addition to their learning is to enable them to understand these key experiences and the assumptions that underpin them. Brookfield (2012) describes assumptions as “guides to truth embedded in our mental outlooks. They are the daily rules that frame how we make decisions and take actions” (p.7). As both Mezirow (1998, 2000) and Taylor (2000) make clear, the way we structure our assumptions provides us with our ‘frames of reference’, the way we make meaning of the world. If we fail to unearth and understand how we frame what we perceive then we are not likely to understand how we make meaning, or indeed how we can change the frame to change the meaning.

Armed with their understanding of these guides to truth, coachee and coach–mentor can work together to enable the ‘resonant leadership’ that Boyatzis and McKee advocate, to emerge.

Great Leaders are awake, aware, and attuned to themselves, to others, and to the world around them. They commit to their beliefs, stand strong in their

values, and live full passionate lives. Great Leaders are emotionally intelligent and they are mindful: they seek to live in full consciousness, of self, others, nature and society. (2005: 3)

What would it be like if coaching started there – if the coach heard the client’s personal, authentic and vulnerable reflection on those personal experiences that delivered significant learning? There appears to be a gap in the existing literature in this area.

There are studies that aim to “provide insights into leadership development” (McDermott, Kidney & Flood, 2011, p.359) derived from leaders’ personal experiences. Despite interesting findings in this particular study, they were not derived from the personal narrative of the top leaders but rather from replies to a semi-structured interview schedule identifying specific areas of research. The researcher, not the research participant, identified the areas of interest.

My interest is in the *personal learning experiences of top leaders*, as identified and validated by those individuals themselves. That curiosity may have been generated by the three trails or life experiences identified at the beginning of this chapter. However, it has been sustained by a requirement within my own coaching practice. Searches into existing scholarly literature to help deliver this requirement produced little in the way of relevant and/or useful research, process or analysis. The articles, dissertations and literature that were of relevance are referred to in the literature review. The most frequently appearing article in the searches was that of McDermott, Kidney & Flood, (2011). Search terms (sorted by relevance) included “top leaders learning”, “personal learning narratives of top leaders”, “personal learning experiences of top successful leaders”, “personal experiences of significant learning by top leaders” and “personal learning reflections by top leaders.” I therefore believe it is valid and valuable to pursue my specific research interests further.

1.3. Research question

Clearly, if the primary interest of this study is in the personal learning experiences of top leaders expressed in an authentic and vulnerable way, then the research question needs to deliver both the space and the framework for this kind of personal narrative. Having defined leaders as people who have achieved significant influence and overall authority in their chosen institution or organisation, I have framed my research question as follows: What are the personal experiences of

learning of individual leaders, and what implications do these personal experiences hold for coach–mentoring at this level?

The specific research aims are:

- To facilitate ten top leaders to articulate their perceptions of their present and past learning
- To understand whether, in their own view, they have had significant learning episodes, which have had a major influence on their decision-making
- To uncover how they harnessed that learning to meet the demands of their jobs
- To articulate common elements among leaders' perceptions of learning
- To work towards and uncover any emerging underlying theory in respect to this learning
- To apply findings to the practice of board level coach-mentoring

Unlike McDermott, Kidney & Flood, (2011) these research aims are not based on the researcher's theoretical assumptions – other than that certain experiences may be significant and impact on future learning. McDermott, Kidney and Flood approach their research through a framework of 5 leadership themes (pp.360 -362) on which they structure their interview questions. This current research, in contrast, asks what do the leaders themselves perceive as being their learning experiences, how did they use that learning and how can any findings inform board-level coach-mentoring?

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

What should be the main focus of the literature review? Should it be leadership? Learning? Organisational learning? Organisations? Power? Learning from experience or experiential learning? Coaching? Executive coaching? All these are very pertinent areas within the context of the research question. To provide research overviews that do justice to all of these areas would require more space than we have available in this dissertation; each of them is a significant subject in itself. However, by researching existing literature on the two key areas of this study (leadership and learning) it is inevitable that writers will also discuss the dynamics of organisations, power and experience.

In 1978, James McGregor Burns (2012) found “one catalogue entry to ‘political leadership’ in the New York Library” (p.19). What Burns was lamenting was not a lack of data but the lack of “a central concept of leadership” across disciplines. Since then there has been an avalanche of interdisciplinary research and literature on leadership. A search for ‘political leadership’ in all the online catalogues of the New York Public Library (New York Public Library, 2013) produced 2,127 results. The word ‘leadership’ delivered 11,283 results in the library and on Google returned 459 million potential links. As early as 1994, Hogan et al (1994) commented that “in terms of the number of printed pages devoted to the subject, leadership appears to be one of the most important issues in applied psychology” (p.494).

The literature on learning is also vast and the term itself is used liberally. Submission of the search word ‘learning’ at Middlesex University’s online catalogue on April 2, 2013 returned over two and a quarter million results. Excluding newspaper articles, it delivered over 1.6m. Jarvis, (2006) one of the main modern writers on learning, understands that the field is immense, crosses a range of disciplines and is even multi-faceted *within* disciplines. He presents us with a huge challenge: “we need a philosophy of learning; we need a sociology of learning and a psychology; we need a biology of learning and a neuroscientific understanding of the learning process” (pp.198–199). He appears to be advocating that researchers add to the universe of learning one facet at a time, knowing that it can never be filled because (2006) “none will capture its complexity, which is as complex as human living itself” (p.199).

Initially, it was anticipated that this research project, being limited to the learning experiences of individual leaders with significant authority over their organisations, would not require an extensive search of the wider literature. However, like mountain climbers who discover new summits as soon as they have conquered the last one, in researching the theme of learning I was at times confronted by an entire range of peaks. One of the challenges facing those who attempt to survey the research and literature on learning is that there are so many aspects of learning to be considered:

The **WHAT** of learning: content, knowledge, data, skills, competencies

The **HOW** of learning: the methods used to facilitate learning (e.g., teaching and coaching, reflection)

The **WHO** of learning: is learning located in the individual, the group, the organisation or all of them? Does the learner as a singular person make a difference to what and how learning takes place? Personality, culture, race, past history and experiences all affect the person who learns

The **WHY** of learning: what motivates and engenders learning (e.g., disorienting events, disjunctures)?

The **WHERE** of learning: the organisations, systemic and contextual influences on learning

The **COMPONENTS** of learning: cognitive, emotional, visceral, neurological aspects

The **RECIPIENTS** of learning: does learning differ for children, adolescents and adults?

The **PROVIDERS** of learning: teachers, trainers, facilitators and so on

The **RESULTS/OUTCOMES** of learning: behaviour and performance change, transformative change, change in espoused theory/theory in action

The **THEORIES** of learning: behavioural, humanistic, psychodynamic, systemic etc.

All these are encompassed by the notion of learning and each is the subject of an extensive literature. This dissertation has little chance of reviewing any of these different facets of learning in any depth. The springboard of this research project is to extend the value of coaching (including the author's own practice) among very senior organisational leaders. My curiosity therefore is in gaining greater

understanding of how individuals at this level of power and authority learn: how they process information; through what lenses they perceive the world and, therefore, how they experience that world and the learning that it offers as factors influencing their behaviour. My hope is that such an understanding can be harnessed to influence how coaching might be even more effective in supporting the ongoing learning of top leaders.

The literature review will cover the following five areas:

- Learning as presented by five main theorists: Dewey, Kolb, (including Kolb and Kolb) Illeris, Jarvis and Mezirow
- Review of organisational learning and how it has an impact on individual learning
- Power and its connection to learning
- Review of autobiographies and their value in this research
- Review of a small sample of dissertations in this area

2.2. Learning

The first clarification that is required is what is meant by the personal experience of learning? It seems important, from the outset, to note that the learning we are talking about is not geared to one time span: past, present or future. This enquiry does not restrict itself to the learning of leaders while they are members of organisations but assumes that they brought with them personal experiences of learning that started before, and will continue after they leave their corporations or institutions. It therefore presupposes that each individual's experience and perception of learning will be informed and made unique by the previous experiences, learning and perceptions they have accumulated in their lives. The logical implication of that statement is that an enquiry into the *personal* experience of learning requires a view of the learner as "being-in-the-world", or "being together with" and in continuous relationship with the world (Heidegger, 1953, p.51). Learners' perceptions are informed, formed and reformed by what Spinelli (2005) calls, the "indissoluble relationship between a 'being' and 'the world'" (p. 108). Already the concept of "personal learning" is widening from a narrow perspective of the individual amassing information (the banking concept of learning where learning is wholly a cognitive procedure) to learning as a collaborative

process that happens within individuals, between individuals and in different contexts.

Worth reviewing is learning that focuses on learners as holistic beings interacting with, and being continuously changed by their “indissoluble relationship” (Spinelli, 2005, p.108) with the world. Although, a review of the literature of phenomenology, and particularly that of Husserl (2006) and Heidegger (1953) would certainly be apt, it would probably be more appropriate to initially focus on a literature of learning with application that is directly pertinent to coaching practitioners.

My main spotlight will be on experiential learning, what Kolb (1984) defines as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p.38). But it includes more than the transformation of experience. For this work, it must include the transformation of the *experiencer*. Jarvis (2006, p.5) champions this approach passionately: “At the heart of all learning is not merely what is learned but what the learner is becoming (learning) as a result of doing and thinking – and feeling”. Now learning is being seen as transformative, not just transmissional: learning includes knowledge, skills and personal changes. It is important to ask: what experiences of learning have changed me and how has that learning had an impact on the individuals, groups and systems in which I live and work?

In this particular inquiry the continuously ‘becoming’ learner is framed within the additional contexts of power, leadership and organisations. It would seem appropriate therefore to review the key literature on experiential learning that is pertinent to this research, and then to examine how the domains of power, leadership and organisation may influence such learning.

In Figure 1, I connect the four factors involved in this kind of learning.

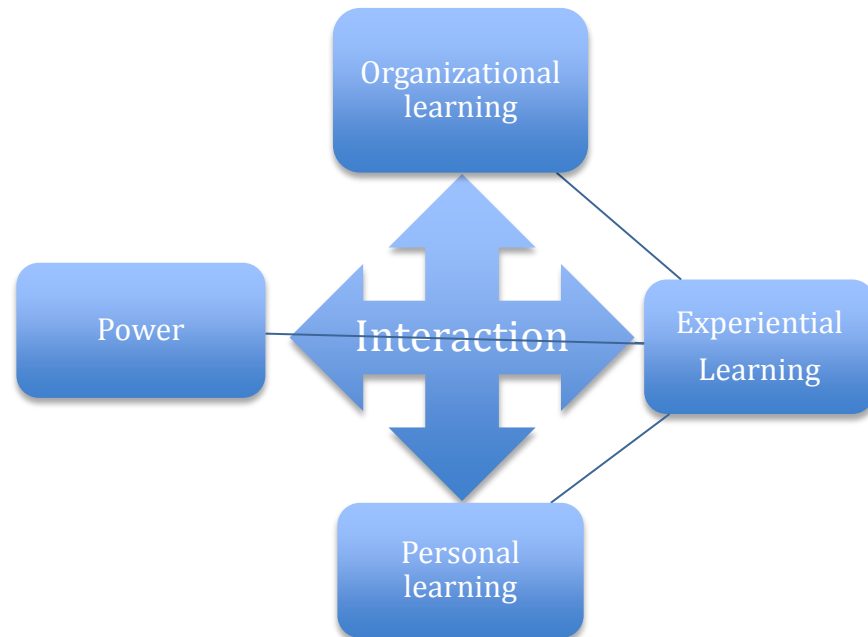


Figure 1: The four elements of learning for top leaders

2.2.1. Experiential learning

Throughout this dissertation I equate learning and experiential learning. Like Kolb all learning, I believe, is experiential. Experience has become so firmly embedded as a key part of learning that it seems almost a tautology to talk about 'experiential learning'. Indeed, in defining learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p.38) Kolb appeared to argue just that.

Initially criticised as the easy, undisciplined route, experience-based learning took over the high road of academic discipline by aligning itself firmly with scientific rigour. The philosopher most responsible for introducing that rigour was Dewey. He repeatedly insisted that educators work with "the systematic utilization of scientific method as the pattern and ideal of intelligent exploration and exploitation of the potentialities inherent in experience" (1938, p.57). During this time Dewey felt under attack from the "educational reactionaries" for the "absence of adequate and moral organization in the newer type of school" (p. 57). Within that political

context, he outlined very comprehensively both the rigour of the process as well as the purpose of what he called 'progressive education'.

It is in this detailed process in support of his cardinal principles that the value of his work endures. He introduces themes around reflection, presence, mindfulness and directive learning that are echoed strongly in later works by Senge et al (2005) Kolb (1984), Schön (1991) Illeris (2007a) and others; these remain important contemporary issues in coaching and learning. Largely as a result of Dewey's extraordinary work, learning was and continues to be regarded today as a complex and interlinked process that Kolb and Kolb (2005) believed "involves the integrated functioning of the total person – thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving" (p.193).

The key sources examined in the next sections are Dewey (1938), Kolb (1984), Kolb and Kolb (2005), Jarvis (2006), Illeris (2007a; 2007b), and, a little later, Mezirow and Taylor (2009).

2.2.1.1 Definitions and sources: what is experiential learning?

Dewey

The bulk of Dewey's work may have been written in the twentieth century but there is little doubt that the early seeds were planted in the late nineteenth century. He came to Chicago in 1894 at a time of an extraordinary renaissance in education in the city, championed most notably by Ella Flagg Young. In her biography of Young, Smith (1979), makes a solid case that she had a very strong influence on Dewey. Addressing the 25th Annual Meeting of the National Educational Association in 1887, Young argues that "wearying the mind by memorizing useless facts, and dulling the brain by useless drudgery are too common features of much of the work performed by both teachers and pupils" (cited in Smith, 1979, p.37). Nine years before Dewey set up his 'laboratory schools', Young was advocating learning that was both clearly pupil centred and 'training' for future learning; both of these aspects were implicit in Dewey's concept of 'continuity' discussed below.

In 1903, she is even more explicit in her views, views that align clearly with those that Dewey articulates in his major work 35 years later. "There are two elements

involved, the learning mind and the subject-matter or environment. To have an intimate acquaintance with each is to have a method of teaching which covers the entire range of that great art" (Smith, 1979, p.11). Like Dewey, this appears to not only display a strong awareness, of the centrality of experience (the 'environment') but also awareness of the interaction between the individual and that environment. Her thinking also draws a clear narrative line to the 'grasping' and 'transformational' modes in Kolb's learning spiral (over 80 years later) with her reference to the assimilating power of the learner.

Dewey picked up where Young left off. As Kolb (1984) unequivocally states, he is "without doubt the most influential educational theorist of the 20th century" (p.5) who best articulates the guiding principles for programmes of experiential learning in higher education. Dewey never used the expression 'experiential learning' but employed the terms of the day, such as 'progressive' education, or the 'newer' philosophy. Neither did he define nor encapsulate a packaged theory of experiential learning. However, what he did very clearly was outline a set of cardinal principles around learning. He was convinced of the organic connection between education and personal experience and equally persuaded that "experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative" (1938, p.45). For Dewey, therefore, what we have now come to think of as experiential *learning* only occurs when that experience is 'educative'.

Two principles defined what was educative or not: continuity and interaction.

1. Continuity: this involves the principle that "every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences" (Dewey, 1938, p.63). For Dewey, learning is systemic and cumulative.
2. Interaction: for Dewey, interaction "assigns equal rights to both factors in experience – objective and internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions" (1938, p.79).

Young and Dewey take learning by the scruff of the neck and move it inexorably into a new phase of its development; learning is no longer information or data implanted in a mind receptive or not, blank or otherwise. It is now the interaction of individual, environment, past knowledge, present context, others and internal and external conditions. Learning has become holistic.

Kolb

Dewey was logically setting out an escalating spiral of development in which each experience created a change in perception and behaviour that in turn affected the quality and extent of subsequent experiences. New experiences became learning through the filters of old experiences.

There is a direct lineage from Dewey's concepts of interaction and continuity to Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT). ELT defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194; Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Kolb helped develop Dewey's philosophy into a model in which the spiral or cycle was continuous, as Figure 2 illustrates.

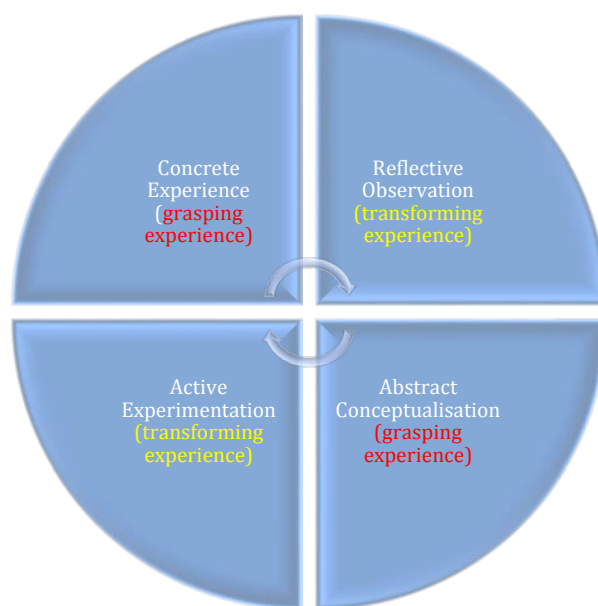


Figure 2: Adapted from Kolb, 1984, p. 42

The model itself has been criticised as being essentially two dimensional because it does not take into account "the influence of the social situation and, therefore, the social construction of experience", (Jarvis, 2006, p. 10). The underlying tenets of the theory, particularly as expressed in later work (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194), are far from simplistic and assume a constructivist approach to learning. These six propositions as he calls them (1984, pp. 25–38; 2005, p. 194) can be summarised as follows:

1. The key to learning is in the process not in the outcomes.
2. "All learning is relearning", entailing a process by which the learner scrutinises and tests current beliefs and concepts and then assimilates them with, and into, 'new ideas'.
3. Learning occurs when "dialectically opposed modes of adaptation" are resolved. These modes are essentially the active – reflective and concrete – abstract pairings in his model.
4. Learning is holistic; it incorporates "the total person – thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving".
5. "Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment". This involves a process of adjusting and reformulating existing ideas in the light of new experiences. Here, Kolb may be making a distinction between "new ideas" (in 2.) and "new experiences". However, the question must arise whether by assimilating new ideas into one's portfolio of existing experiences, one is not creating a new set of experiences?
6. "Learning is the process of creating knowledge. ELT proposes a constructivist theory of learning whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner".

Kolb builds a framework that is firmly founded on Dewey's principles whereby experience is transformed into learning via 'continuity' and 'interaction'. He very explicitly insists (as do Kolb & Kolb, 2005) that the whole person is involved in interacting with the social environment to construct knowledge. As with Dewey, it is clear that at the heart of ELT is learning at the interface: at least five of the six propositions involve interaction.

Central to Kolb's understanding of learning is his second proposition that "All learning is relearning" (Kolb, 1984, p. 28; Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). At an individual level "new impressions are connected with the results of prior learning in a way that influences both" (Illeris, 2007a, p. 87). This can happen automatically when associations take place (Pavlovian behaviourism) and habit takes over. A dog has learned to salivate at the sound of a bell ringing. However, Kolb builds in a process to his learning cycle that connects an experience with reflection; this results in new learning. It is possible to call "*learning from experience*" that automatic learning that comes from an experience without reflection or consideration, and "*experiential learning*" that experience where events and incidents are reflected upon mindfully in order to become instruments of learning.

In summary, Kolb's six propositions appear to be both thorough and useful in helping to identify and raise awareness of the key concepts in experiential learning. What Kolb has added to Dewey's contribution is that there is a clear process within experiential learning, and that reflection on experience can result in deep, transformative learning, which affects the person learning as much as what is learned.

Kolb and Kolb

Kolb and Kolb (2005) develop the question of where learning occurs and the interface between learner and ecosystem through Lewin's (2010) field theory and his concept of life space. Lewin saw 'field theory as a method of building scientific constructs from the interdependencies present in a life space (2010, location 4595). Kolb and Kolb (2005) dub life spaces 'learning spaces'. 'Life space' they define as including "all facts which have existence for the person and excludes all those which do not. It embraces needs, goals, unconscious influences, memories, beliefs, events of a political, economic, and social nature, and anything else that might have direct effect on behaviour" (2005, p.199).

Kolb and Kolb examine the learning spaces through the social theories outlined below. By doing so, they inevitably raise our awareness to the vast range of possibly interacting variables that may occur within these learning spaces. Apart from Dewey and Lewin, Kolb & Kolb (2005, p. 199) cite three other theoretical frameworks as informing the ELT concept of learning space:

- Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, cited in Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p.199) work on the ecology of human development that identifies the learning interaction as occurring within a set of 'nested' learning spaces: 'microsystem', 'mesosystem', 'exosystem', all finally enveloped by a 'macrosystem' to reflect the concurrent influences on a learner at a particular time.
- The situated learning theory of Lave & Wenger, (1991, cited in Kolb and Kolb, 2005) where "knowledge resides not in the individual's head but in communities of practice." (2005, pp. 199 -200) Learning, therefore, develops through participation in, and development of the "history, norms, tools and traditions of practice" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 200).
- Nonaka and Konno (1998) appear to be Kolb and Kolb's main source for the Japanese concept of 'ba'. Here, according to Kolb and Kolb, "knowledge embedded in *ba* is tacit and can only be made explicit through sharing of feelings, thoughts, and experiences of persons in the space" (2005, p. 200).

Originally conceived by the philosopher Nishida (Nonaka and Konno, 1998) *ba* appears to emphasise much more of a transcendence than Kolb and Kolb's language implies. Nonaka and Konno state, "To participate in a *ba* means to get involved and transcend one's own limited perspective or boundary." (1998, p.41) It seems to me to be a communing rather than a communal learning space in which there is (ideally) a constant cycle of renewal of individual-in-the-community and community-within-the individual. As Nonaka and Konno put it "one can both experience transcendence in *ba* and yet remain analytically rational". (p.41) While this is not the place for an extensive discussion of *ba*, the question that strikes me is whether the 'balance of power' between organisation and individual is such that the individual is in danger of being submerged rather than transcending.

Informed by all these frameworks, learning is now viewed as "a map of learning territories, a frame of reference within which many different ways of learning can flourish and interrelate" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 200).

Learning territories widens the concept of learning to an extent not formulated previously. Which of these territories, at what time and to what degree, enables, blocks or distorts learning? Kolb and Kolb (2005) appear to argue that learning happens at the interface between the individual, the event and the learning space. The individual carries an accumulation of experiences, assumptions and intentions. The event contains within it a number of objective and situational conditions. To add to the complexity, the learning space holds a further variety of objective conditions, attitudes, assumptions, cultures, normative styles and intentions. How do we know which of these takes root most firmly with the individual? How do we know which combination of variables creates *this* particular learning or *that* particular blockage? Does, for example, an analytically inclined student in an art school learn differently from a creative person in that art school? Or do they both gravitate towards the cultural norms of the institution? Kolb and Kolb can only suggest a possibility; from their research with students there are clearly too many variables in the learning equation for us to be certain about what is happening. While their approach certainly illustrates the significant influence that institutional and other contexts exert on learning it does not extend our knowledge of the process of change at individual level, of what individuals experience as their learning, and why they interact more or less strongly with specific variables.

Illeris

Illeris while acknowledging that in referencing experiential learning, “we still very often use David Kolb’s book from 1984 with this title”, accuses Kolb of rendering the term “meaningless” by concluding “that all learning is experiential learning” (2007a, p. 84).

He draws the distinction between book knowledge, “the often boring and limited syllabus learning of traditional schooling” and the “rich and versatile life events” that are part and parcel of living. What Illeris brings to the experiential learning table is that all learning contains three dimensions (2007b, p. 25): “content and incentive, which have to do with the individual acquisition process, and the societal dimension, to do with the interaction process between the individual and the environment” (2007b:25). The foundation of Illeris’ theory is built on these three dimensions of learning:

Content: this consists of “knowledge, understandings, skills, abilities, attitudes and the like”.

At first sight, content includes (but is not limited to) the “knowledge, understanding and skills” that the learner brings to the acquisition process (2007b, p. 25). However, in his discussion of “barriers toward learning”, he outlines one such obstacle as “content that is not acquired, grasped or taken in as intended” (2007a, p. 90). Content, in Illeris’ view, seems to be the accumulated armoury, attitudes and assumptions as well as the new situation or interaction. Acquisition of learning, according to Illeris, would therefore seem to be the product of the ‘linkage’ between the ‘old and new’ content. “The learner’s abilities, insight and understanding are developed through the content dimension – what the learner can do, knows and understands – and through this we attempt to develop *meaning*” (2007b, p. 25).

Incentive: this is the “dimension of emotion, feelings, motivation and volition” (2007a, p. 87) involved in learning. Illeris clearly acknowledges that incentive is not only part of the driving force towards learning, it “is always part of both the learning process and the learning result” (2007b, p. 24). How one learns helps determine what one learns. What and how one has learned helps shape how and what one will learn in the future.

Interaction: “the social dimension of interaction, communication and co-operation” (2007a, p. 88; 2007b, p. 27).

Interaction is what happens “between the individual and his or her environment during all our waking hours, societal in nature and depends on the social and material character of the environment and thus on time and place” (2007b, p. 22).

He points out that all three of these elements need to be present to make learning true learning. One or other of them can be isolated to the detriment of learning itself for example, “traditional syllabus learning is predominantly related to or aimed at the content dimension, whereas important life learning includes significant learning in all three learning dimensions” (2007a, p. 92). Content (the ‘what’ of learning) combines with incentive (the ‘why’ of learning and the subjective state of the learner) and the interaction (the ‘how’ of learning) to result in his overall definition:

Experiential learning can primarily be understood as learning in which the learning dimensions of content, incentive, and interaction are involved in a subjectively balanced and substantial way. In addition, the more complex the type of individual acquisition, the more likely we would be to characterize the learning as experiential. Furthermore, defence against learning tends to prohibit experiential learning, whereas resistance toward learning tends to trigger experiential learning (which will often be in opposition to the intended learning). (2007a, p. 94)

Although, Illeris repeatedly reminds his reader of the interconnectivity of the three dimensions, he also makes clear distinctions between them.

Apart from, perhaps, his certainty that acquisition is predominantly ‘biological’, Illeris’ proposed view of the learning process may appear to be in line with the concept of being-in-the-world. However, Illeris makes two assertions that separate him from Husserl and Heidegger. As outlined earlier the first is that acquisition of learning takes place solely at individual level. Is it ever possible that the individual can somehow seal herself off from the world while she ‘acquires’ the learning from the ‘content, incentive, interaction’ process? Damasio (2006, p. 2010), whom Illeris frequently cites in his ongoing rebuttal of the Cartesian duality of mind and body, also presents a strong neurobiological case, at least implicitly, for being-in-the-

world (2006, p. 88). "The body and brain form an indissociable organism" he writes, which "interacts with the environment as an ensemble, the interaction being of neither the body nor the brain alone" (2006, p. 88). Damasio describes how the brain not only receives signals from the environment, the body and "parts of itself" but also generates 'maps' or images of all its interactions, including retrieving memories (p. 64). Thus far, Damasio's neurobiological approach has no problem with Illeris' concept of acquisition as "linkage between the new impulses and influences and the results of relevant earlier learning" (2007b, p. 22); or even with it being essentially biological and within the individual. After all, the mapping is created by the biological brain from stimuli received from the (individual) 'body-brain partnership'. However, that ignores the fact that the individual is in a continuous flow of change and interaction with the entire world he or she inhabits – inner and outer. As Damasio makes lyrically clear:

We ourselves are in constant motion. We come close to objects or move away from them; we can touch them and then not; we can taste a wine, but then the taste goes away; we hear music but then it comes to an end; our own body changes with different emotions and different feelings ensue. The entire environment offered to the brain is perpetually modified, spontaneously or under the control of our activities. (2010, pp. 66–67)

The corresponding brain maps change accordingly. Both the individual and the world are "perpetually modified" by their mutual interaction. The acquisition or mapping (and re-mapping) of learning would therefore itself be modified by the spiral of changes generated between the world and the individual. Thus, it would seem that everything that occurs in the biological individual is constantly affected by the world it inhabits. Nothing "exclusively takes place on the individual level" (Illeris, 2007b, p. 23).

Illeris' second assertion appears to be even more explicit in its assumption of a duality between the 'being' and 'the world'. "What is decisive here is that learning always has both a subject and an object: there is always *someone* learning *something*" (2007b: 24).

That may well be arguable when an individual learns the formula for calculating the volume of a cylinder. But is it true when an individual learns German or even microbiology? Does the learning become a finite 'something' only when the learner decides to *end* the learning? And even if we are dealing with so-called scientific

formulae, is the learning restricted to the recollection of the 'fact' or does it reflect what occurs when a child successfully applies or understands the logic behind it: the confidence, the increased incentive, the richer communication and interaction with others in the maths class? At best, it would appear that we could only define an *aspect* of the learning that has occurred.

In both these assertions, Illeris seems to imply a 'pause', a period of stasis in which the individual gathers himself and 'learns something'. The question is whether the problem is linguistic rather than conceptual; by linking learning (a process) with content (an object), he creates a narrative of someone doing (acquiring) something, thus separating the learner from his/her learning. For Illeris, the *ingredients* of learning may occur in the 'interaction' but its 'acquisition' (the combination of old and new 'content') occurs *within* the individual.

It seems therefore that he differentiates between learning and experiential learning by the presence of the three dimensions "in a subjectively balanced and substantial way". (2007a, p. 94)

If experience is a subjective matter and if experiential learning can only be present if the three dimensions are judged to be present to their required degree, then how does anyone (other than the learner) know whether experiential learning has occurred? Does it matter to a third party? Are human beings really capable of judging whether content, incentive and interaction are present in a (2007a, p. 94) "balanced and substantial way" in the moment of the action itself? If he means this judgement takes place 'on reflection' then the implication is that the dimensions need to be present for experiential learning but not necessarily at the same time. As Illeris provides no time frame for the dimensions to manifest themselves, is he not in danger of making his definition so wide as to render it meaningless? At the very least he may well be doing what he accuses Kolb of doing – equating learning with experiential learning.

Illeris adds value to the learning debate by attempting to expand on the detail of the key components of the 'multiplexed' context (the interactions, the filters and the drivers) of experiential learning. It is a holistic approach that ultimately fails because, in his attempt to define (experiential) learning, he needs to first identify it as 'subject' or 'object' (2007b, p. 24) – thus linguistically, at least – separating being and the world.

Jarvis

Jarvis is one of the most prolific writers and researchers on learning. He concludes after over 30 years of work in the field with an overview: "Can we have a comprehensive theory of learning? In my previous work on learning, I have always argued that we can never have such a theory, and at the end of this study I am more convinced than ever that this is the case" (2006, p. 198).

Neither Jarvis nor Dewey felt compelled to define learning – experiential or otherwise – although, as the title of the work referred to makes clear, Jarvis certainly searched for one. Their reluctance to define it seems to be related to their belief in humanity's infinite capacity to learn. Jarvis (2006) concludes, "humans will continue to learn for as long as humanity exists and, significantly, humanity and human society are continually developing." (p.199).

However, Jarvis, like Dewey, has no hesitation in detailing the ingredients or "elements of learning that must always be present: the person, as learner, the social situation within which the learning occurs; the experience that the learner has of that situation; the process of transforming it and storing it within the learner's mind/biography" (2006, p. 197). These elements certainly reflect Dewey's key elements:

- Continuity – the learner's experience of the situation founded on previous learning, then the process of 'transforming' the experience (into learning) and 'storing' it in what is, by definition, a changing 'biography'.
- Interaction – between the learner, the learner's current 'biography' (and presumably world view), the social context, and the new experience.

Jarvis (2006) does not ignore the elements introduced by other theorists including the learner, the learning context, the learner's experience and the adaptation into what he calls the learner's "biography" (p.197). Very sensibly he goes on to observe (2006) that because there are innumerable variables within these elements, theorists have focused on a limited selection of these (p.197).

By accenting its infinite nature, Jarvis is not avoiding scrutinising the nature, application and experience of learning. He is, it appears, saying that it is best researched, or perhaps can *only* be researched, in step with one's perception of one's self-in-the-world'.

We-are-with-others-in-the-world; we all live in relationships which we depicted as interpersonal (I–Thou) and the impersonal (I–It). In other words

we live in the physical world but also in social relationships. No person is an island but we are individuals. We experience the world phenomenologically – it is our preeminent reality, our life world. (Jarvis, 2006, p. 52)

This dialectic approach, holding both the holism and individuality of 'we-are-with-others-in-the-world', appears to be informed by Heidegger's (1953) concepts of 'Dasein' and 'being-in-the-world'. While it is not the intention to explore Heidegger's concept in any significant depth, it is important to note the factors by which his work informs not only the work of Jarvis but also the phenomenological approach to experiential learning:

- If 'being-in-the-world' and 'always-being-my-own-being' are interwoven within a holistic universe, then all learning must occur within this universe and is constantly 'infecting and infected by' that universe. There are no clear barriers between subject and object.
- If 'being-in-the-world' is a "unified phenomenon" (1953, p. 49) then being and learning are not only affected by that which is manifestly present in the same space and time (the range of table and chairs in the furniture store), but also by that which is present in the same time but not space (the online catalogue) and that which is not objectively, or even consciously, present at all. This would include, for example, my assumption, based on a myriad of variables, of what a desirable set of table and chairs should look like.

The variables for experiential learning now seem extensive, if not quite infinite. Both Dewey and Jarvis are entirely correct, in my view, in perceiving that a definition is neither useful nor possible. In a global environment, within which human beings 'experience' news, moving pictures, games, debates, conversations on and offline, virtually and in reality, which permutations constitute individual learning? Within this vast reality what becomes our 'preeminent reality', as Jarvis put it? What does it take for *this* experience (or network of experiences), rather than that, to become preeminent? Where does the learning occur?

For Jarvis (2006), learning is less about content than about being-and-becoming: being in the world and learning with the world, becoming with the world and being *aware* of that becoming. In his words, "Learning is the process of being in the world. At the heart of all learning is not merely what is learned, but what the learner is becoming (learning) as a result of doing and thinking – and feeling" (2006, p. 5). For him, the learning occurs not only in the continuing relationship

between the individual and the world it experiences but also in that between the transforming being and (logically) the transforming world. As he puts it (Jarvis, 2006), "At the heart of all my models of learning has been the process of transforming episodic experience and internalising it... it is the whole person who is in the world, so that cognition, emotion and activity are all affected by the social context" (p.23).

2.2.1.2. Where does the learning occur?

If learning is a process of constructing knowledge then presumably the learner's perceptions, and cognitive and emotional responses, will be different each time a 'concrete experience' presents itself, even if 'objectively' that experience could be identical on each occasion. And since that learner comes to each concrete experience with an accumulation of a vast number of prior perceptions and behaviour-shifting experiences that now interact with a new set of variables, (only some of which are consciously experienced), do we ever actually know who the learner is and what she has actually learned? In Figure 3 I attempt to present the complexity of trying to name the extensive number of variables involved in the learning process:

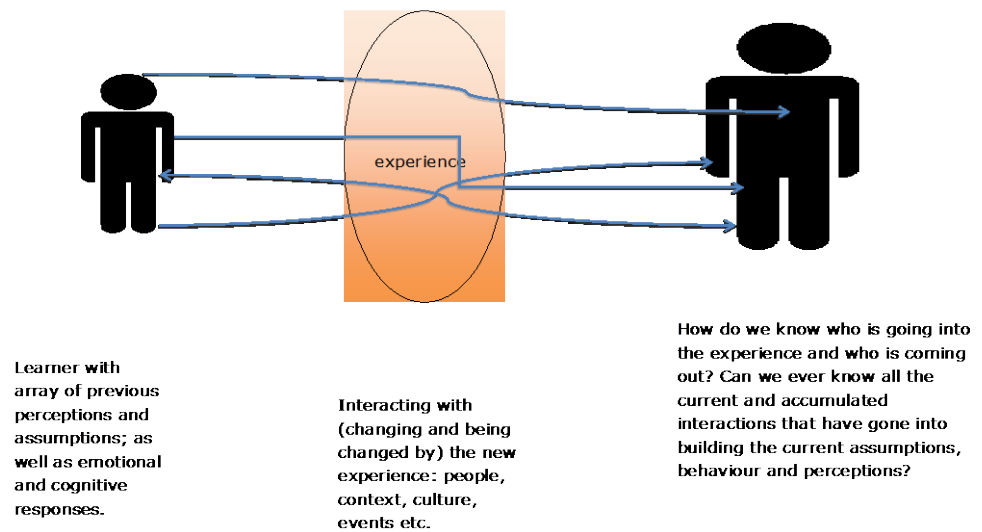


Figure 3: Connecting the infinite variables in the process of learning

The variables and combinations among the interactions are immeasurable. What does the learner bring with her? How will those perceptions and assumptions interact with current conditions, behaviours, social and cultural norms, physical environments, climatic conditions or current emotional responses? Which of these interactions will play a dominant role today, and how much impact will that dominance have?

Dewey discriminates between “experiences that are worthwhile educationally and those that are not”. He includes (1938) “a highly expert burglar” (p.66) among the ‘mis-educated’ because, apparently, he may have shut himself off from *continuing* to grow. How can Dewey know that? He has no idea whether a ‘specialist’ burglar cuts himself off from continuing to grow any more than, say, a scientist who is totally devoted to researching schistosomiasis on the western shores of Lake Victoria is no longer open to further growth. Both, after all, have severely narrowed their breadth of experiences; neither offers a clue as to whether their sensitivity to ongoing growth has been stunted. Dewey’s prime motive in introducing an ethical base may have been to pre-empt any accusations of moral laxity in a new and vulnerable educational model. However, he now presents us with what could be termed ‘good learning’ and ‘bad learning’. My own view is that learning resides

outside moral domains. How learning is used, on the other hand, is at the very heart of morality and ethics.

In contrast to Illeris, Jarvis proposes that learning occurs *at the interface* between the learner and the world. It is an ever-shifting interface in that, he sees humans as embedded in the world and the world embedded in humans. If the learning occurs at the interface, or intersection or confluence, between being and world, it follows that we ask what happens there to enable the learning to arise? According to Jarvis (2006) "Our experience occurs at the intersection of the inner self and the outer world and so learning always occurs at this point of intersection, usually when the two are in some tension, even dissonance, which I have always called 'disjuncture'" (p. 6). Dissonance becomes the key activator in learning.

This 'disjuncture' according to Jarvis (2006) happens when the stability of our participation in the world – our confidence that we can act and exist reasonably competently within our environment – is jarred by an event or situation that makes us aware that we need some additional tool, awareness or skill to restore that previous confidence, and competence. The event can be either exhilarating or unpleasant; it changes our state of awareness; it brings us up short. (2006, p. 16) Jarvis uses language that indicates discomfort and even an element of negativity for the learner in 'disjuncture'. This element of unease is related to Illeris' proposal that the incentive to learn is driven by the need to "constantly maintain our *mental and bodily balance*" (Illeris' italics) (2007b, p. 26). However, he does seem to identify the imbalance a little more neutrally than Jarvis: "It might be uncertainty, curiosity or unfulfilled needs that cause us to seek new knowledge or skills" (2007b, p. 26).

Mezirow et al

The modern origin of this destabilising moment was probably Mezirow who called it "a disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow et al, 2000, p. 22; Mezirow and Taylor, 2009, p. 190). According to Mezirow (2000), it was the trigger of a sequence of "phases of meaning becoming clarified" (p.22) and was followed by "self-examination of fear, anger, guilt or shame" (p.22). Therefore it seems that, to an extent, Jarvis and Illeris echo Mezirow in seeing this trigger as negatively destabilising; creating an incentive to rebalance. Taylor (2000) points out that a catalyst for learning may not be "a sudden, life threatening event; instead they are more subtle and less profound, providing an opportunity for exploration and clarification of past experiences" (p. 233). Thus, for example he discusses how transformative learning may occur as a result of the interplay between an outside event and an existing

state of mind which catalyses a realisation that current problem solving tools are no longer sufficient. Despite the research, however, Taylor admits (2000) “there is little understanding of why some disorienting dilemmas lead to a perspective transformation and others do not” (p.300).

Brookfield (2012) seems to identify a number of key ingredients of ‘disorienting dilemmas’. They:

- Are unforeseen
- Result in a process of reappraisal especially around our meaning-making schema and meaning perspectives
- Can be traumatic and disturbing or can be pleasurable (an unexpected illness or witnessing an amazing sunset can both be disorienting events (p.71–75)

In essence, disorienting dilemmas disrupt the assumptions we hold about our being-in-the-world. They cause us, or at least prompt us, to think critically about the assumptions we hold. What Brookfield goes on to describe – and which may be pertinent to the application of the current research in future work – is the deliberate staging of disorienting dilemmas as a way of creating critical thinking and strong learning experiences in the classroom.

To conclude this review of experiential learning, it may be useful to briefly locate the theories of (social) constructionism, and constructivism (Prawat & Floden, 1994; Martin & Sugarman, 1997; Willig 2008, eds. Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2010) within this research.

Modern cognitive constructivists (Martin & Sugarman, 1997) accept that there are strong social influences on individual learning but that the learner makes sense of her world separately from that social context, internally as it were.

Social constructivists, on the other hand, argue that meaning-making is strongly contextual (Prawat & Floden, 1994). They write that “knowledge evolves through a process of negotiation within discourse communities and the products of this activity – like those of any other human activity – are driven by cultural and historical factors” (p.37). Perception and learning are constructed as a result of the mutual interplay between the individual and the environment.

Social constructionism, according to Willig (2008) is equally context driven. Experience and learning are always “mediated historically, culturally and

linguistically” (p.7). It is within the ‘social constructs’ of how our society defines, perceives, locates and tells stories about phenomena that we interpret and experience events. Knowledge emerges from social interaction not internally from individuals alone or from the environment alone.

It would seem that the modern concepts of social constructionism and social constructivism share very similar qualities and it would serve little purpose here to seek clarity of definition. Perhaps the most useful basis is the attempt by Martin and Sugarman (1997) to bridge the gap between the two by stressing the mutually developmental relationship between the learner and social contexts. The learner is able to adapt and transcend those contexts to suit her purposes because, after all, it was human agency that created those contexts in the first place. Because of its association with this centrality of the learner, and because it does seem to represent a bridging of the two concepts, the term ‘social constructivism’ would seem to be a more useful term to use in this work.

2.2.1.3. Conclusions on personal experiential learning

It may be useful to examine how what has been learned from this literature review has an impact on the research questions.

It would appear that the value to this enquiry is much less in the definitions that the writers reach, or attempt to reach, than in the *elements* they identify as being essentially part of learning.

Our five main theorists (Dewey, Kolb, Illeris, Jarvis and Mezirow) align and identify – in various permutations – a number of core principles.

- The whole person is involved in learning: learning occurs with the ‘whole person’ being-in-the-world.
- One of the dimensions of the learning process is what Dewey (1938) calls ‘continuity’, the process combining past and present experiences and perceptions to form new ideas.
- Another key dimension is what Dewey (1938) called ‘interaction’, the interweaving of so-called ‘objective’ conditions and ‘subjective’ experiences. Both are essential for learning and both are influenced and change each other in the process.
- The impact of learning on the learner. The internal–external conflict among the writers is most starkly illustrated by two assertions. At the one end, we

have Illeris' claim (2007b) that there is "a subject and object in learning: there is always someone learning something" (p. 24). At the other, Jarvis (2006) states: "At the heart of all learning is not merely what is learned, but what the learner is becoming (learning) as a result of doing and thinking – and feeling" (p.6). According to Illeris it appears we learn 'something' and then go on to learn 'something else'. According to Jarvis (2006) we 'become': we become our learning and, since "human beings are in the world and the world in them", we continuously 'become' and 'transform' ourselves and the world (p.6).

- The drive or incentive to learn cannot be overlooked: the writers reviewed seem to relate the motivation or drive to a need to restore or maintain balance. Jarvis closely follows Mezirow's concept of 'a disorienting dilemma' which appears to trigger questioning and clarification of meaning. Jarvis (2006) calls it "a disjuncture" (p.6) which drives us to think consciously about the way we deal with the world. Illeris (2007b) sees our drive as directly related to feelings of insecurity or a knowledge gap that we need to assuage to "constantly maintain our mental and bodily balance" (p.26). Kolb (1984) also seems to attribute the drive to learn to the need for balance and comprehension within some sort of ideal or, as he put it, "Absolute – an organic whole that includes everything in a totally determinant order" (p.118). Dewey, as an educator, was primarily concerned with how to create experiences to motivate students to learn rather than with what experiences actually did.
- We could add the essential holism of learning, to what we have learned from this literature review; it is the indissoluble nature of learner, learning and the world(s) with which they interact at all times.

Thus far, how is this literature review of experiential learning of relevance to this enquiry? First of all, our literature review has named seven dimensions of learning that themselves can be valuable assets to coaching.

The field research conducted for this programme examines how individual leaders with significant organisational authority experience their learning. The writers we have examined see learning as occurring to individuals who are in perpetual interflow with their world: their social, environmental and organisational contexts – and with their own biological and neurological 'assets'. This means that *learning occurs to the entire person within his/her entire 'world'*. Is this what we will find from our interviews with ten top leaders?

Kolb and Kolb propose (2005) that learning occurs as a result of “the dialectic processes of assimilating new experiences into existing concepts and accommodating existing concepts to new experience” (p.194). Logically, therefore, current learning and application is part of a continuum of historical experiential adaptation and transformation. It will be of interest to see if the leaders who participate in this research identify such historical experiences as key to their current practice.

If historical experiences and learning have an impact on current application, do powerful ‘pivotal incidents’ or ‘disorienting dilemmas’ have a significant impact on leaders, as this author found?

Do disorienting dilemmas always lead to changes in existing behaviour, or do they result in entrenched behaviour that confirms old learning by raising levels of anxiety?

With learning, both the individual and the environment are changed. There is no passive element in ‘being-in-the-world and the world-in-the-being’. This would seem to validate the idea that, rather than the subject learning a finite object, it (the subject) *becomes* the product (the transforming subject) of its perpetual learning. Within this perpetual interaction, the learner contextualises the new experience within the constructs of experiences stored in the brain.

This concept of ‘becoming the learning’ is important to this research: have the top leaders interviewed merely learned from experiences or have they become experienced learners? It is this ‘becoming the learning’ that is a key element of understanding how individuals *experience* the learning through which they *become* leaders.

All those interviewed in this work are organisational leaders. What will be of interest is whether they will model constructivist theory and transform both themselves and their social contexts – even while they may be bound by the language and tools of those institutions.

It would appear to follow that when we consider the learning of leaders with power in organisations, we need to examine not only the personal learning of the individual within his/her *entire world* but a) the impact of his/her *current* external context (the organisation/institution) on that learning, and b) his/her role (leader) or influence (power) *within* that organisation. Two questions are relevant here. The first is asked by Raskin (2002): “How does a power role affect access to, and the quality of, both incoming and outgoing information?” (p.15). The second question is

asked by Baumgartner (2012): "How does power affect the transformative learning process in different contexts?" (p. 111).

2.2.2. The impact of organisations on learning

The pertinent questions for this section of the enquiry are:

- What is it that blinds organisational leaders from undertaking the necessary steps to ensure the growth – or even survival – of their organisations?
- What contextual/systemic/organisational factors enable or prevent organisational leaders' learning?
- Are these factors (in addition to their personal and social contexts) specific to organisations or are they generic?

In modern organisations, two dialectic tensions continue to be in play: consistency and change; standardisation and innovation. Both would seem to be necessary for the 'good health' of a modern organisation particularly where high-volume output is required. Handy (1985) sees that tension as inevitable, "Organisations are always pulled by these two forces of uniformity and diversity. By nature they would prefer uniformity. That way lies predictability and efficiency" (p. 303). He goes on to point out that organisations will go to great lengths to steer a course of uniformity, through such tactics as budgetary and market forecasting, outsourcing to introduce flexibility of costs in employment and overhead; and the absorption of competitors through mergers and acquisitions (p. 305). Since then, other measures have been introduced to maintain uniformity – such as 'Just in Time' stock control, Public Private Partnerships, high-volume call centres and digital data management.

Innovative change (whether to process, product or service) can result in significant and costly disruption with the result that innovative thinking is often restricted to incrementally increasing the effectiveness of the status quo. However, set against the imperative of standardisation and 'uniformity' is that of survival in the face of competing new products, services and processes that may transform the entire market/environment. A military example of this conflict was the fall of France at the outbreak of WWII. French military doctrine at the time called for avoiding the devastation of the Great War and keeping the fighting off French soil. "It was also consistent with the doctrine of methodical, continuous defence" (Wilcox, 2010, p. 64). This was essentially the WWI strategy of containing strategically fortified positions. Unfortunately for the French (and for the allies) the Germans, unhindered by the 'success' of WWI, had made transformational changes not only to their technology but also to their entire battle and warfare strategy. They introduced "*Blitzkrieg* – lightning war" (Smith, 2006, p. 131). Instead of attacking the enemy's

defence lines they avoided them altogether thus penetrating deep into French territory with the help of fast *Panzer* divisions, newly developed dive bombers, paratroopers and "the rapid movement of small, well-armed groups into the enemy's depth" (Smith, 2006, p. 132). The result was total, catastrophic defeat for the French and a rapid, even cost efficient, victory for the Germans. Smith (2006) points out that because of the speed and nature of each engagement, the Germans not only made use of captured French fuel for their tanks but also ended up conserving resources.

In modern organisations, these two dialectic tensions continue to be in play: consistency and change; standardisation and innovation. The danger, as with the French military, arises when those tensions are unbalanced: when the leadership is overly focused on maintaining standardised quality of output and fails to see the emergence of new and transformational competition.

In this study, our interest is in how the leaders we interview deal with that tension:

What do they learn about themselves, their organisation and their way of intervening in an already formed structure that needs to adapt to modern day needs?

There is a wealth of literature on how organisations stop learning or block their learning (see Wellman, 2009). Janis's work on 'groupthink' (1973) is one of the best known. At the extreme end of groupthink are the experiments conducted by, among others, Milgram (1974) and Zimbardo (2007) in which individuals are 'persuaded' to behave cruelly 'in the name of the organisation'. Carroll and Shaw (2012) discuss these as well as the organisational factors that impact individual behaviour (pp.41–53). However, in these works there is little to show the impact of that block on leaders, how successful they are in overcoming institutional inertia or how much they contribute to it.

Ironically, it could be argued that a dominant leader, as long as s/he is a vigorous critical thinker, could actually be a defence against groupthink and conformity. Steve Jobs famously harried his colleagues at Apple to do things his way but also (in the words of the famous 1997 Apple advertising campaign) to "Think Different". There was no room for groupthink when Jobs cajoled his developers with the words "Did you think of this?" (Isaacson, 2011, p, 1105).

Groupthink should not be confused with lack of innovation or risk-aversion. The very first symptom can be extreme risk taking. The 'dotcom bubble' that burst at

the end of the twentieth century was certainly a result of groupthink where investors rationalised that the Internet was an entirely new environment in which normal investment conditions did not apply. Valliere and Patterson (2004) articulate that stance very well, “Many investors appear to have been attempting to make rationalized but logically flawed responses to these environmental forces. This flawed perception led to escalating commitments and a failure in normal investment decisioning and governance practices” (p.19).

Although, Janis himself implicitly regards “independent critical thinking” as the counterpoint to groupthink, his remedy is to recommend a layered infrastructure of independent bodies to challenge and evaluate the in-group decisions (1973, p. 24). It would seem to be extremely unwieldy solution and may also contain within it the danger of extending groupthink to other groups.

Magni et al (2013, pp. 52–53) found what they called excessive “cognitive absorption”(p.52) in group situations. Singular involvement and enjoyment of an activity may actually be detrimental to learning. This absorption can result in individuals not being alert to contextual signals and flawed arguments. What both ‘groupthink’ (Janis, 1973; Wilcox, 2010) and ‘excessive cognitive absorption’ (Magni et al. 2013) seem to have in common is a situation where the relationships become much more important than the learning that they are aiming to produce. Maintenance of the amicable ‘safe haven’ of the leadership group becomes more important than testing the validity of the assumptions the group makes. The pleasure of being *in* the training or learning group becomes much more significant to the individual than the aim of the learning. In both cases, alertness and learning appears to be retarded by the individual’s reluctance to think critically and challenge the security of the status quo. Hence the remedy recommended in both cases is to develop robust processes for critical thinking (Brookfield, 2012):

1. “Discovering the assumptions that guide our decisions, actions and choices
2. Checking the accuracy of these assumptions by exploring as many different perspectives, viewpoints, and sources as possible
3. Making informed decisions that are based on these researched assumptions” (p.160).

This is of direct relevance to this inquiry. As the introduction noted, one of the questions the research seeks to examine is how leaders specifically ensure that they learn and keep on learning about the organisation they are leading.

Much of the research on organisational learning has focused on the challenging of embedded assumptions. Argyris (1999) talks about discovering “the designs (rules) the clients have in their heads that keep them aware of the discrepancies among their espoused values, their actions, and their theories-in-use” (p. 61). Kegan and Lahey identify “assumptions and the big assumption” as one of the dimensions in their quest for “immunity to change” (2009, p. 57). For Scharmer (2007) the assumptions are embedded in “the blind spot”, which is “the place within or around us where our attention and intention originates. It is the place from where we operate when we do something” (p.7).

All these writers understand that organisations generate conditions that can militate against critical thinking – against questioning ‘given’ assumptions. Much of their work deals with examining ways for leaders and organisations to defend themselves against “groupthink”, (Janis 1973) “excessive cognitive absorption” (Magni et al. 2013) or organisational co-optation. Argyris’ (1999, 2000) model I and II theories, as well as their corollaries ‘single and double loop’ learning, move from a relative lack of awareness to a rigorous questioning of assumptions.

Organisations therefore are contexts that hold a multitude of complex and often contradictory factors manifested in theories, purposes, goals, structures, processes and behaviour. Scharmer (2007, p. 242) calls it “a system’s hyper-complexity”. His exploration of learning and change within this ‘hyper-complexity’ goes beyond examining the assumptions of the organisation to scrutinising the assumptions of the examiners; in effect ‘triple loop learning’. Peschl explains this in more detail: “While classical learning strategies focus on changes in the domain of knowledge and the intellect, the triple loop approach also includes changes on the existential level and in the domain of the will/heart” (2007, p. 138).

This model challenges and transforms organisational and social blind spots by enabling critical awareness of both the current realities of the being-in-the-world/world-in-the-being as well as “my own highest future possibility as a human being” (Senge et al. 2005, p. 220). It displays a profound understanding of the flow between self, the organisation and the ecosystem they both inhabit. It also is a remarkable attempt to shine a light on the process of change within this complexity by insisting that the direction of that change is ultimately determined by what is called the “highest future possibility as a human being” (Senge et al. 2005, p. 220). In a statement reminiscent of Jarvis’ concept of learning as becoming, Scharmer argues that “in exploring the future potential, you aren’t exploring a future someone else has written for you. It’s more intimately concerned with your

evolving, authentic Self – who you really are” (Senge et al. 2005, p. 2212). One presumes, because Scharmer clearly dislikes a dualistic approach, that this ‘emerging future’ must also incorporate the “highest future possibility” of the organisation itself with which the self/selves are in continuing dialogue.

In stressing its evolving nature Scharmer (cited in Senge et al. 2005) does not appear to regard this “highest future possibility” as a form of ‘cardinal authentic self’ but as “more of an intention you build for yourself, for your life, perhaps even before you are born” (p.220). It would seem to this author that what is intended is a continuous re-examination of the ‘optimum’ with (Scharmer, 2007) “open mind, open heart, open will” (p.245). The logical extension of this model, if situated within a social process around organisational change, is that the “highest future possibility” (Senge et al. 2005) of the entire ecosystem (of people, organisation, markets, clients, sector) is served, rather than that of the individual. This approach appears to be applied in Scharmer’s “Theory U” (Scharmer, 2007) where, in critically reflecting on the current and future possibilities of the organisation, the leadership is inevitably forced to reflect on its own.

The left arm of the ‘U’ in “Theory U” (Scharmer, 2007) certainly would appear to try to model at least two of the original research questions:

1. How do successful leaders learn from within the organisation they lead?
2. What historical learning experiences shape leaders’ decisions and what learning occurs during their terms of office?

It would almost inevitably uncover the third: ‘Are leaders significantly influenced by pivotal incidents?’

All in all, the U model seems to reflect much of the process and experiences of leaders in this research inquiry.

I am aware that in not explicitly discussing the spiritual and universal aspects of Scharmer’s theory I may be accused of cherry picking. Scharmer defines both spirituality and the “dialogue with the universe” very pragmatically indeed. There is little mystical about his “dialogue with the universe” (2007, pp.424-425): it is listening to and learning from one’s world. As regards spirituality, his approach is even less mystical. It is, says Scharmer, not religious but the learned source of our creativity. Both these aspects, therefore, are integrated within the Theory U and closely describes the key components of that theory, “open mind, open heart, open will” (2007, p.40)

There is a practical issue with the U model relevant here. Although Scharmer and his colleagues have used the U model on specific coaching projects (2007), as I have myself, the process involves a considerable amount of time and effort reflecting on areas that do not accelerate the short term operational or even strategic priorities of an organisation. It requires patience, courage and time to suspend one's apparent goals and let 'the future emerge' rather than be dragged out. In an organisational environment where consistency of output and standards is still the primary focus, it is particularly difficult to persuade the top leadership to enter into transformational practices. However, there is little doubt that, in order to be prepared to 'meet the future' (to defend oneself against 'blitzkrieg'; to understand the principles of technology-driven entrepreneurship; to manage the impact of financial derivative products), at least part of the organisation needs to be prepared to periodically suspend and re-evaluate all current assumptions and make room for the "highest future possibility".

In summary, what the literature shows is that organisations, by virtue of their purpose to deliver high-volume products and services, have a clear requirement for both consistency and innovation. Each of these requirements enables assumptions that can inhibit learning. These assumptions can result in "groupthink"; conformity in behaviour and thinking, lack of understanding as to the authentic "purpose in use", "single loop learning" – and even superficial "double loop learning".

Leaders have a difficult task: how to be part of their organisations both physically, emotional and psychologically and, at the same time, have the psychological and emotional distance to be able to think and learn critically about it. It is important to see whether leaders interviewed in this study employ similar or related models to ensure that they and their organisations learn.

2.2.3. The impact on learning of power and/or authority

Leaders are in positions of 'power'. They have and are given 'authority'. Organisations, institutions and companies are 'arenas' or 'contexts' of power.

The term power is used in many different ways. Petit (2010) connects it to learning but is in no doubt about its many meanings. "The multiple faces of power call for

multiple faces of learning and relationship" (p.26). He also comments that much of the literature on power has been developed within the "age-old tension between 'agency' and 'structure' in social theory" (p.26). This ranges from Lukes' (2005) focus on 'who does what to whom' to considerations of power embedded as assumptions and norms in social culture (Foucault, 1991; Bourdieu, 2010).

It is Foucault who is most concerned in articulating the relationship between power and knowledge in what he called "the history of knowledge" (Elders, 2011, location, 280). It is a valuable model for a review of the impact of power on learning in that Foucault strives to uncover what is there – rather than what, in his interpretation, 'should be there'. Foucault did not see the individual as passive but insisted that a definition of self was always mitigated by its relationship to power. The "marginalized" (prisoners, asylum inmates, the disenfranchised) are always capable of revolution but can "define themselves only through their struggle with power" (Gutting, 2005, p. 103). Those closer to power "are merely problematised" (Gutting, 2005, p.104) in that while they have a much greater range of self definition, it too is within the context of power relations.

Foucault does not see power as monolithic but he does regard it as ever present. While initially it may be argued that he did not take into account the fragmentation of power through technological skills (who has what power in a hospital – the chief executive or the chief medical consultant?) he may be correct that the discourse is always conducted within the domain(s) of power.

Particularly relevant to this work is the research conducted by Collin et al (2011) among operating theatre staff in a large Finnish hospital. They discovered that a continued interplay between roles and individuals on the one hand and hierarchical or authoritarian 'norms' on the other, challenged assumptions, practices and power within the institution. Because both surgeons and nursing staff held and required knowledge from each other, neither power nor learning flowed in one direction. In a statement that explicitly places the authors in "a socio-constructivist approach" (2011, p.303) they propose to "take the view that power relations are continuously reproduced and redefined during social actions and between social actors both in individual and social levels" (2011, p.303). Power relations may be flexed but they are certainly always there. The impact on learning within this domain is surely huge: power and even roles of authority are part of a continuing reconstruction of learning involving values, self perception, assumptions, and cultural and social norms.

Within this discourse, numerous instances come to mind (many of them personally experienced by myself both as coach and chief executive) that directly impact on the leader's learning. These include the assumption by leaders that they are in their roles because of their superior knowledge and therefore should neither ask nor be offered knowledge or help. There are instances where the holders of 'technological power' and 'managerial power' (the rivalry between consultants and managers in the NHS being a case in point) regard themselves as in competition with one another.

The assumption of both the 'superiority' and the perceived 'need' for the existence of a leader is, according to Gordon (2011), deeply embedded within the meaning systems of an organisation. These assumptions include both the office and the office holder. One of the dangers that these assumptions hold is their ability to reinforce the distortion of the flow of information both to and from leaders. Flyvbjerg (2000) describes how a report on the positive impact on learning of decentralising schools was edited by the education leadership to make a case for *centralisation*. This sort of 'rationalised irrationality' occurs not just because of the multiple power interests that exist in a context but because "people in positions of dominance rarely have their viewpoints and actions challenged or checked" (Gordon, 2011, p. 197). The impact of what these authors are saying is that a lack of understanding of the multiple roles of power constrains leadership at all levels. Gordon suggests that "methods for preventing leaders and other powerful individuals from falling victim to their own power are a fruitful area for research" (2011, p. 197). Where might we start the search for such methods? We hope, in one of the implicit questions of this study: how does the individual leader personally experience his learning of and within power and authority?

What the literature reviewed seems to show however, is that the leader (and in fact all participants in the organisation) learns to understand and therefore manage the impact of power on learning by a continuous, critical discourse to uncover the complex reality of the organisation. Neither power nor knowledge is in the hands of a single agent.

2.2.4. Autobiographical accounts (of learning)

It is reasonable to assume that a review of the literature on the personal experience of leaders' learning would include a selection of autobiographies. In fact, many would expect it to be the first port of call for those interested in how leaders learn and have learned: who better to define that than the leader himself in a written document that is in the public domain? At first glance such personal accounts are an exploration of the experience and development of the leader, which, arguably, includes learning experiences. Initial research into and reflection on published autobiographical material (Clinton, 2004; Obama, 2007; Jackson, 2007; Welch & Welch, 2005; Belafonte, 2012) revealed a common characteristic: a protective positioning under the public spotlight, and a consciousness of their place in history that resulted in a highly censored version of their lives and experiences. It was not that they were being dishonest, but it seemed that the retelling of their experiences was filtered by self-consciousness of their place in history, of how they wished to be remembered. Isaacs (1999) captures this well: "While many people privately will admit to themselves that they do not understand why things happen as they do, that in some respects they are as puzzled as the next person, they rarely if ever do this in public" (p.272). Public figures, writing about themselves and their lives, often feel forced to adapt a position of *detached spectatorship* rather than engaged openness. It is for this reason that the present study into the learning of leaders is being conducted under careful anonymity – even if a number of the participants were quite relaxed about their identities being revealed. In anonymity there is less to protect. Combined with dialogue, it creates the space to allow puzzlement and vulnerability, to do what Kahane (2007) suggests – "lower my defences and open myself up" (p.4).

In contrast, President Bill Clinton recounts a clearly visceral experience when he rescued his mother who was being attacked by his stepfather. He tells little or nothing about his own emotions during the episode, only that it had (2004, p.79) "a particularly devastating effect on my brother". In recounting the personal and political impact of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, (2004, pp. 773, 800) he expresses "disgust" at himself and remorse at hurting his family but little about the experience of learning – or his own confusion. His defences remain securely up.

General Sir Mike Jackson, in a very personal and paradoxically formal autobiography (2007) is open, straightforward and briskly detached. Even when he took a very significant risk and bluntly told the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, "Sir I'm not going to start World War Three for you", (p.336) we learn

nothing of the contexts of that stubborn adherence to principle. He tells his reader why he disagreed but nothing about how he was managing himself in the situation.

Pasupathi (2001) points out that the context and way in which memories are generated or, more accurately, reproduced, directly affects their content. Conversations, for example, with the listener empathising, encouraging or probing, provide a different co-construction of an event than a solitary narration such as an autobiography. Additionally, the *goals* of the speaker, argues Pasupathi, govern the emphases and selection of the storyteller. These goals can depend on what the story teller perceives as the listener's expectations, or the way the narrator wishes to position herself to the listener. So, for example, a former US President may present a different profile to his reading public than to a researcher enquiring about his learning experiences, especially if he knows he is not going to be named as the narrator. Pasupathi (2001) summarises the issue well: "The life story represents a facet of identity that is directly subject to co-construction and consistency pressures and directly offers the potential for stability (keeping the same events, interpretations, and themes) or change (adding or removing events, interpretations, or themes)" (p.662).

There is a second reason why autobiographical 'solitary writing' is less pertinent to this study than would appear at first sight. The clear intent of this research is to apply the value of its findings to the practice of executive or workplace coaching. As discussed earlier, learning and leadership, particularly obviously within communities and organisations, occurs in the interaction between the individual and the social environment. In the theories that have been reviewed, social interaction, and dialogue with others form a key part of the learning experience. Key learning models such as critical thinking (Brookfield, 2012), theory U and presencing (Senge et al, 2005; Scharmer, 2007) cannot be applied without dialogue. Autobiographies may be solitary reflections, but they are rarely *critical* reflections on the self, fashioned through dialogue. Conway and Pleydell-Pierce (2000, p. 264) cite a plethora of researchers who stress the role of autobiographical memories to sustain, update and reposition the self's narrative to fit in with current goals and beliefs. Some of these authors "emphasized more negative aspects of this relation such as the distortion and even wholesale fabrication in favour of current self-beliefs" (Conway & Pleydell-Pierce, 2000, p.264). This exposes the fundamental difference between dialogue and autobiographical narrative. The goal of the former is to discover; that of the latter is to 'arrange'.

2.2.5. Doctoral dissertations on leaders' learning

There are three doctoral dissertations that resonate reasonably closely with this research and can be usefully included in this literature review.

Tinelli (2000) looked particularly promising at first glance. Not only did this qualitative study focus on what and how leaders learn in the process of "transforming organisations" but leaders were defined in a similar way to this research as those "in a position of formal authority in an organisation with the responsibility for overall organizational administration" (p.25). Tinelli conducted narrative interviews with two leaders over a period of a year while they were transforming their organisations. Among his conclusions were that leaders' learning is particularly contextual and individualistic and that they learn from workplace challenges (p.369). One of his strongest findings was that the two leaders did not consciously try and learn; they learned haphazardly and only when it related to work (p.351). He found that the leaders did not undergo "transformative learning, resulting from questioning or challenging their values, beliefs or perspectives" (p.313). The notion that transforming organisations may reveal transformative learning in the leaders responsible for the change is interesting but it does not do itself justice. The reason is that the changes undertaken for the two researched organisations are not transformational at all. The model chosen closely follows Argyris' single loop learning: identify the problem, identify the changes required to overcome the problem, rally support for the change and 'the future' and integrate the changes (pp. 215–216). There is no indication that any of these changes required transformative questioning of fundamental assumptions. As Tinelli describes them they appear to be a redirection of business focus rather than transformation. Therefore if leaders' learning is 'particularly contextual' and work related, and if the preoccupation of these leaders is with 'single loop' change, it is no surprise that these leaders align their mode of learning to the requirements of the context. Perhaps even more crucially, the learning of these two leaders cannot be reasonably generalized to how 'leaders learn while transforming organisations'.

Meers' (2009) grounded theory research into how significant life experiences have an impact upon the leadership development of 15 leaders is useful background for this research. Meers' selection criteria is based on what he calls an "influence relationship" (p.7) rather than one of overall authority. The majority of his sample

comes from public service and the seniority of the corporate participants is not clear. His interviews specifically focus on the impact of significant life experiences on learning. His findings are that the learning comes not from “one or two significant events” (p.48) but that the participants apparently (2009) “embraced significant experience” throughout their lives and have absorbed great learning from them” (p.48). One of the research participants, Chris, said “That’s so hard because it really is not one thing, it really is everything” (p.77). Another, Pete, added “...it’s not an event, so it’s a process...that has really shaped who I am (p.77). It appears that what he is saying is that while the dramatic episodes themselves may not have been seen to have a direct impact on their development, the leaders were open to learning from “life experience” (p.125) and saw their learning as developmental processes, very closely adhering to Dewey’s (1938) concept of continuity. There is an implication here that these leaders experienced their learning through a cumulative chain of interactions rather than in response to identifiable events. In contrast to the leaders in Tinelli’s (2000) research, these participants were asked to reflect on ‘learning from life’ rather than focus on events (solely) at work. In that sense, the very framework of the study created the opportunity for a much broader and reflective dialogue. The current research, while working with very senior leaders with authority (as Tinelli did) also encourages reflection on learning experienced before and outside the workplace.

Through narrative inquiry Durrant (2013) researched what he called ‘critical learning’ of senior executives in their transition from professional specialists. This is relevant not only because of its focus on leaders’ learning at a ‘disorienting’ phase of their lives but because it is an area in which I have some experience as a professional coach. Twelve Canadian leaders, equally split in gender, participated; seven were from the public sector and five from the private sector. Durrant found a total of 18 “most common insights and skills” (p.79) that were identified by more than 7 of his participants. These ranged from “treat people with respect” (as the most frequently identified) to “build trust in all your relationships” at the bottom of the list. What is not clear is whether these leaders had to *learn* these attributes in their transition or whether this awareness was developing in any event. ‘Treating people with respect’, for example, is a sine qua non for survival at any level in a modern corporate or institutional environment – as are the majority of the other insights. Indeed there seems to be remarkably little focus on the ‘business of leading’. Only one of the insights is related to the business or area of activity, namely, “Acquire broad understanding of your field of business” at seventh place on the list (p.79). In addition, my experience of both coaching in this area, and of

working as a corporate CEO is that crucial transitional learning occurs (by definition) from the focus of specialist to the holism of leadership. Is not the essential difference between specialist and senior executive the management of multiple stakeholders and contexts in both the leadership and the organisation?

In contrast to Tinelli's (2000) CEO's, Durrant (2013) found that these leaders were avid learners, who actively "pursued a wide range of learning opportunities" (p.139) and appeared to feel that leadership itself required an openness to learning through debate, challenge, alternative points of view, theory and even negative models and experiences. Durrant acknowledges that this characteristic may be influenced by a sample that "emphasized the inclusion of respected leaders" (p.139). The contrast with Tinelli's research may be seen as contextual – Tinelli's leaders were working on business turnarounds, Durrant's leaders were reflecting on how they had transitioned from specialist to senior executive. Durrant (2013) also proposes that this "open minded love of learning" (p.139) may actually be a significant characteristic of successful leaders. This is important for this research in that it specifically looks at the learning experiences of *successful* top leaders. Will these research participants display a similarly active pursuit of learning from all quarters?

2.3. Summary and conclusions

The recurring theme in this literature review appears to be that learning crystallises around the phrase 'Being-in-the-world-and-the world-in-the-being'. All the learning theorists reviewed here subscribe, with varying degree of emphasis, to the social constructivist notion that learning is constructed between the whole person and his/her worlds, whether in 'maps of experience' (Damasio's, 2010) or in 'learning spaces' (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). The most resonant implication from this is the image of the individual and her worlds *becoming* together. It is possibly for this reason that – apart from Kolb (1984, 2005) and Illeris (2007a) – none of the writers above defined experiential learning. If learning is intrinsically 'becoming' then there is no completed subject or object to define. Dewey's concern (1938) that all learning should lead to an openness to more learning seems, on reflection, less an issue of narrow focus (burglary) than of relationship to the world. How do human beings remain open to learning and to continuous becoming-in-the- world?

If this learning and becoming is indeed never-ending then it will not stop benefitting from further research.

The literature reviewed did not deliver any conclusive research on whether there is a relationship between disorienting dilemmas or disjunctures and learning; why relatively minor episodes can sometimes become significant catalysts (as in my case), or even whether some of these disorientating events become agents of entrenchment rather than change. This is a gap which, it would appear, can only be filled through dialogue with individuals experiencing those episodes – as this study will demonstrate.

This chapter reviewed literature on the impact of context (organisation) and role (leaders in power) on learning. Argyris (1997, 1999, 2000), Janis (1973), Kegan and Lahey (2009), Senge et al (2005) and Scharmer (2007) have provided valuable work as researchers, theorists and practitioners on understanding and reducing learning inhibitors within organisations. The development of theory on groupthink (Janis, 1973) underpins the importance of relationships as both inhibitors and promoters of learning. Similarly Argyris' work on single and double loop learning (1999, 2000) followed by that on triple loop learning (Peschl, 2007; Scharmer, 2007) provides a rich pathway for current practice and future research, as does Scharmer's U-theory (2007).

The literature on power and learning is extensive but is largely focused on examining access (breaking *in*) to power that is principally regarded as monolithic. Implicit in the aim of this study is to discover how modern organisational leaders experience and, therefore, understand what Petit (2010) calls "the multiple faces of power" (p.26) as multiplicities of interactive relationships. Power and the nature of power involve assumptions to be questioned like any other 'learning'. The gap that this research fills is that it examines the subjective experience of leaders in their ongoing attempts to break *out of* the lens of power and learn from as wide a circle as possible.

This review concluded that autobiographical writings were an entirely different genre, which – by their solitary nature – ran counter to the practice of 'dialogue-based' coaching, which this research is intended to inform. The characteristic of autobiographical recall and writing to protect their current self-beliefs militates against critical self reflection and vulnerability (Isaacs, 1999; Pasupathi, 2001;

Conway and Pleydell-Pierce, 2000, p. 264). This is the reason why this research takes the form of anonymised 'dialogue'.

Finally, this review concluded that existing research conducted certainly overlaps within this research area but leaves a number of unanswered questions: Is an active pursuit of learning a characteristic of successful leadership or do leaders learn (Tinelli, 2000) haphazardly? Are the learning requirements for leadership really little more than those of a good corporate citizen as Durrant's (2013) work suggests? Do leaders learn from significant events – or do they learn from the accumulation of experiences actively and openly pursued as both Meers (2009) and Durrant (2013) seem to infer?

There are clearly limitations in this literary review. In reviewing such a vast area, within which concepts (of learning, organisation, power, and context) are multiple, there is bound to be a danger of missing relevant research. This limitation is made clear by the fact that this review was frequently informed by sources that were *not* obviously identified as being part of the literature on learning, experiential learning, leaders or power. However, the review has been a result of a lengthy search of online and physical libraries as well as the author's continuing and ongoing interest in day-to-day reading and coaching practice.

As an advocate of critical thinking, the question must arise: have I, the researcher made my selection as a result of a sufficiently rigorous uncovering of my own assumptions? There is an ever present danger of researching a certain train of logic as a result of deeply embedded assumptions, which Brookfield (2012) recommends are uncovered through various forms of dialogue. The admission above of the resonance of 'learning being part of becoming' must be seen in the context of a social constructivist epistemology that can best be assessed qualitatively. Similarly, the suggestion that autobiographical recollection tends towards a self-protective rather than a self-critical stance is based on research that is not specifically related to leaders in power (Conway and Pleydell-Pierce, 2000). A study comparing and contrasting the content of a selection of leaders' published autobiographies with anonymised conversations with those same leaders might produce a more verifiable connection. Even then the study could be fraught with problems of validity. In essence, because of the breadth of the area, this has had to be a review of the literature that has been seen as relevant to this research programme. In itself that is a limitation but it is one that otherwise would make the review overwhelming and, ultimately, of little value to this research.

While the literature on the areas of experiential learning, power and leaders, organisational and social context and autobiographical writings is extensive, there are a number of questions at the heart of the relevant literature that remain unanswered.

- How do leaders in authority, subjectively and privately, express their experience of learning?
 - What do they identify as key or significant learning in their lives?
 - What, in their perception, helped trigger significant learning from these events?
 - What types of learning do they perceive they brought to the job versus what they learned 'on the job'?
 - What organisational learning inhibitors have they encountered and how do they deal with them?
 - How do they see the nature and impact of their authority on their learning (subjectively and from within)?
- Do these same leaders feel their experiences can be used to inform the coaching of new leaders?

The core research questions that emerge are: what are the personal experiences of learning of individual leaders, who have achieved significant influence and overall authority in their chosen institution or organisation, and what implications do these personal experiences of learning hold for coach-mentoring at this level?

The value to the academic and coaching communities and to future leaders is that this research presents a rare opportunity to listen to leaders reflect within a context that encourages transparent critical thinking rather than protective positioning. The problem that this research addresses is the gap between literature and research on top leaders and coaching practitioners themselves. On the one hand, much of research and theory on top leaders has been 'from the outside looking in'. Both positivist as well as semi structured qualitative research and even autobiographical accounts tend to be filtered by the requirements of the researcher or the positioning of the autobiographer respectively. On the other hand, coaches of top leaders may have access to valuable personal experiences of their clients but would find it difficult (both ethically and practically) to utilise that data to enrich academic learning and theory development.

If we are to coach, be or research leaders then it is essential that we add to our sources the voices of leaders from 'the inside looking out', It is also important that, these voices are analysed within robust research methods to help gain greater insight into the development needs, drivers and inhibitors of top leaders. This is the gap on which this research aims to focus. By doing so it is following the basis of good coaching practice. After all central to all individual coaching is the voice of the client – in addition to existing theories, models and the practitioner.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Overview

As discussed earlier, there is a plethora of literature on leadership and leaders, on learning and experiential learning and on power and learning. However, there appears, to be a significant gap in research on how individual leaders personally identify and experience their key learning. As far as can be ascertained, there is little research and/or literature on the learning of top leaders that can be transferred into the field of executive coaching. The research question addresses these gaps:

What are the personal experiences of learning of individual leaders, who have achieved significant influence and overall authority in their chosen institution or organisation, and what implications do these personal experiences of learning hold for coach-mentoring at this level?

How best to do that? If the issue is that we do not know how individual leaders personally experience their learning, then in order to address that issue we need to gain access to either what they 'say they experience' (in as an authentic form as possible) or to provide an objective measurement of that experience.

Clearly one cannot investigate all the learning experiences of a number of top leaders or even most of them. In order to make research feasible, such an exploration would need to be restricted to the learning the individuals in the sample regard as significant at the time they are speaking. That means, inevitably, they may select learning experiences that preoccupy them at that particular time or a historical experience that remains strongly resonant for them after many years. This should not affect the research question, which seeks to understand how leaders experience the learning *they* consider to be significant. It is not up to someone else, myself included, to define what is significant to and for them. It is what is foremost *in their own* perception at the time. It is therefore acceptable to enquire after the detail or nature of the experience but it is not appropriate to question (directly or by inference) the validity of the significance.

3.2 Reflections on ontology, methodology and epistemology

When dealing with research into learning, it is relatively difficult to separate the nature of “knowledge (epistemology) and the nature of reality (ontology)” (Allison and Pomeroy, 2000, p.92). Knowing or, more accurately, constructing reality is a kind of circular journey where reality has an impact on our knowing and our knowing creates templates that have an impact on our reality. As argued in the previous chapter, the ontological perceptions and assumptions underpinning the epistemological and methodological approach of this work is that being is essentially a social experience, as indeed is learning. Key to this is Heidegger’s concept of “Dasein” (1953). Dasein is the nature of being that is conscious of its being. At the risk of adding to the confusion surrounding Dasein, for me it means the nature of being human, the experience of which results in both an understanding and interpretation of being-in-the-world.

To be in, and particularly to interpret, the world is also to learn in the world. This learning is a continuous and multidirectional process. The person continuously interprets self and the world and is continuously interpreted by that world that is itself interpreting and being interpreted. In essence a learning being becomes in a becoming world.

If learning occurs as a result of continuous interaction and continuity between the individual and the world (Dewey, 1938), and if we agree that both the individual and the world are in continuous flow, then it follows that we change and are changed by every interaction. We are, as Damasio puts it, “perpetually modified” (2010, p.67). No learning can be experienced in isolation. Nor is learning an object, a finite acquisition, but a process of continuous ‘becoming’ as Jarvis (2006) makes clear, “At the heart of all learning is not merely what is learned but what the learner is becoming (learning) as a result of doing and thinking – and feeling” (p.5). The learner and the learning are indissoluble: I am what I learn.

At the social and individual level, therefore, the experience of existence is continuously entwined with and affected by the dynamic tensions (the contradictions, conflicts and commonalities) of continuously interpreting them. Those experiences are, thus, unique to each individual but framed within a common understanding of being human (Dasein).

This research therefore is concerned to identify the personal meanings that selected leaders attach to the flow of “interaction and continuity” that constitutes their selected learning.

What methodology is most appropriate to uncover and assess these personal meanings? How does one, in simple terms, gather data that accurately reflects individual, personal meaning-making experiences?

Positivist or quantitative methodologies model themselves on the natural sciences and primarily aim to measure observable phenomena to enable the “generalization of findings, and to formulate general laws” (Flick, 2009, p. 36). The central focus of positivist methodologies tends to be decided by the researcher’s ideas and concerns rather than that of those researched. For example, in a quantitative study titled “How chief executives learn and what behaviours distinguish them from other people” (Beamish, 2005, p. 138) a sample of leaders from the private sector is compared with another from the public sector as regards behavioural characteristics defined by a DISC personality profile. The interest here has less to do with discovering how those top executives learn than with how they can be categorised within terms set by the researcher. The research did not seek or require an understanding of the experience of the leaders – only measurements and comparisons of pre-defined phenomena.

A qualitative research design can also validly allow the perceptions of the researcher to dictate the parameters of the enquiry. One study entitled “Understanding leader development: learning from leaders”, is based on semi-structured interviews framed around 20 questions that try to access the opinions, processes and perspectives of the leaders (McDermott, Kidney and Flood, 2011, pp. 358–378). Its purpose was to “integrate managers’ personal experiences of leadership development with theory to provide insights into leadership development for aspiring and developing leaders” (p.358). In order to gain insights into those personal experiences it would surely be desirable to access something of the subjective meanings attached to them. However, the closest the questionnaire came to asking the leaders to reflect on the subjective experience of their learning was “What are the critical things that have shaped you as a leader?” This enquiry into the ‘critical shapers’ could have launched a deeper exploration of the research participants’ meaning-making but did not go down that path.

The issue, therefore, for this project is not whether the methodology is quantitative or qualitative but whether it is able to answer this research question, which clearly requires access to the research participants’ perceptions of their experience, the meaning they make of those experiences and how that meaning is connected, for them, to their learning.

An African proverb made famous by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (Brooks, 1994) says, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter". The same sentiment applies to meaning-making. Until we have the means of accessing the neurology underlying thinking we are confined to asking individuals for their interpretation of the events of their lives. We currently do not have the neurological tools to objectively measure relatively generalised modes of activity such as divergent or convergent thinking, let alone individualistic modes such as meaning-making.

This inquiry is certainly shaped by this author's epistemological standpoint that learning occurs at the interface between individuals and their worlds but it does not seek to establish verification of that standpoint. Rather, the answers that this research seeks relate to how selected individuals experience learning (that *they* have identified) at that interface, and how they use it in their leadership positions.

The quality and nature of the data that is required here would appear to be most appropriately generated by what Willig (2008) describes so well as: "Qualitative data collection techniques [that] need to be participant led, or bottom-up, in the sense that they allow participant-generated meanings to be heard" (p.5).

Wertz et al (2011) track the development of qualitative research mainly through psychology where researchers were interested in accessing the experience and perception of patients. These qualitative methodologies share a number of interests. They are focused on the experience of the researched. They tend to avoid variables that are defined too rigorously by the researcher before the research process begins because such parameters would inhibit the research participants' making their own sense of what is being investigated. Qualitative research is conducted outside laboratory conditions in the natural setting of the research participants both in order to access the meaning-making of the respondents and to maximise the practical applicability of the findings. As Flick (2009) points out, scientific (positivist, quantitative) research results are not only difficult to reproduce in everyday life because of all the controls, but more importantly those self-same controls fail to exclude a whole range of contextual influences e.g., culture, race, gender and so on. Another common factor of qualitative research is that it is not looking for cause and effect. Reflexivity is a further common concern, and not all agree about the degree to which it should be included. Flick (2009, p. 37) certainly regards it as an essential feature of qualitative research while Willig (2008, p. 10) sees the degree of reflexivity as a differentiator among qualitative methodologies.

She very usefully differentiates between personal and epistemological reflexivity. The former, which will be discussed more fully later, raises questions of personal values, perceptions, experience and beliefs that may affect the research. The latter asks what does this data “represent before we can analyse it?” (p.9). Or to put it directly into epistemological terms, ‘within what theory of learning (epistemology) are we going to place this data, and therefore within what boundaries are we going to analyse it?’

The epistemological foundation of this work revolves around what Martin and Sugarman (1997) call the bridge between social constructionist and cognitive constructivist thought. They do not provide this bridge with a label, but for the sake of easy reference it could be called social constructivism. Purists in the social constructionist school see the individual as being “completely constrained by the kinds of conversation and social relations found in social experience” (Martin and Sugarman, 1997, p. 376). On the other hand, the strict cognitive constructivists would, much like Illeris, insist that change or learning occurs internally, inside the individual and away from the social context. The two theories have, as Martin and Sugarman point out, tended to acknowledge social/individual reciprocal influence. I agree with Gadamer (2013) that the so-called ‘original meaning’ of the text can only sit alongside the meaning of the interpreter, who is situated within a different social context of meaning-making. As a result of this ‘fusion’, the text changes; the interpreter changes by her understanding of the text, and therefore develops a different understanding of herself-in-the world. Likewise the ‘world’ changes by the changes of those (text and self) contained within it.

It follows therefore that where social constructivism is used as the guiding epistemology in research on individual experiences of learning, reflexivity on the reconstruction of both experience and meaning-making (both leading up to and during the research) will be ongoing. Reflexivity is therefore also required on any co-construction being conducted between researcher and participant. While accepting that the researcher is part of the co-construction, validation of that co-construction by the research participant (the leader being researched) must surely be a requirement of this project. After all, the core of this research is how leaders experience the learning that *they* consider key to their being-and-becoming leaders. The core to this research study is to understand in as authentic a way as possible the expression of that leader’s experience at the time of the telling (i.e. the interview).

Sartre (1948) grasped this well when he defined authenticity as “having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate” (p. 90). Solomon and Flores place their definition squarely in the social constructivist/constructionist realm by identifying authenticity as consisting of levels of multiple awareness: of self, of self in relationships and of the fluidity of identity according to context and “our commitments to other people” (2001, p. 91). Neither of these definitions requires a detailed assessment of what is ‘true’ and what is not. But both require a deep sense of awareness and reflexivity, on the part of both researcher and researched, of the continuing process of construction and reconstruction of experience and identity in relationship with the world. This is not to constrain the inevitable construction but to ensure that the research focus is maintained: in this case, on the experience of top leaders.

Willig’s “epistemological reflexivity” (2008, p. 18) thus serves as an elegant reminder to be continually aware of the structural parameters created both by this social constructivist approach as well as the subsequent design and analysis used.

4. Method

4.1 Introduction

Willig (2008), in her review of research methods, returns repeatedly to three epistemological questions, which I have found useful:

- a) What sort of knowledge does the method aim to produce?
- b) What assumptions does the chosen method make about the world?
- c) What is the role of the researcher in the research process?

What sort of knowledge?

Because the question specifically seeks to access how individual leaders *experience* their learning, the type of knowledge that is required is that which reflects how those leaders view and express that experience. Therefore, both the selection and articulation of the learning experience(s) needs to be that of the research participant. This knowledge will be scrutinised to review its usefulness to the future coaching of top leaders through a process of collaborative theme-search. Whether common learning themes emerge that can be used to influence future coaching of top leaders is open to question. Either way, common themes or not, the conclusions will be valuable to the coaching profession.

What assumptions are made about the world?

As discussed at some length, the central epistemological assumption of this work is that experiential learning occurs at the interface between the individual and his/her world. Therefore, human experiences and learning, while individual, occur and develop 'within the world'. However someone's world is not a discrete entity; it is interpersonal rather than personal. Persons are persons-in-relationships, to themselves, others and their world. In this sense there is no such thing as an individual who learns as 'an individual' and interprets their world with a solely individual lens. This has a bearing on the knowledge that this research is aiming to generate in that the context(s) of the experience and learning are as important as the 'learner and experiencer'. That does not lead to any conclusions about a commonality of interpretation but it does (if one follows Heidegger's logic) lead to the possibility that the research participants in this project share an "understanding of being" (1953, p.10). If these leaders do indeed share an understanding of being-

in-the-world then it would be useful to examine whether any common learning themes can be found in the knowledge that is produced.

What is the role of the researcher?

If the epistemological social constructivist basis of this work is that learning occurs at the interface between learners and the world, then logically what Damasio writes follows: “The entire environment offered to the brain is perpetually modified, spontaneously or under the control of our activities. The corresponding brain maps change accordingly” (2010, p.67). It is assumed, within this paradigm that both researcher and participant will modify and be modified by the interaction between them. However, since the knowledge that this research aims to produce is the identification, interpretation and meaning-making that the research participant (and *not* the researcher) attaches to the experience of learning, the role of researcher is that of a reflective tightrope guide. My role is to encourage the research participant to reflect on those learning experiences as openly as possible while in turn reflecting that my own questions or comments will, inevitably, modify the researched experience, the participant and the researcher. What is vital is that “the research participant’s account becomes the phenomenon with which the researcher engages” (Willig, 2008, p. 54).

In conclusion, the method that this research selects needs to operate effectively within the following parameters which will now become the criteria used to select an appropriate research philosophy and methodology:

1. It should enable the research participants to identify and reflect on the learning experiences of their choice in as authentic a way as possible.
2. It should transparently acknowledge that the research participants’ articulation of their experience and learning will be reconstructed in the telling and may well be co-constructed (to varying degrees) by the research participant and myself as the researcher.
3. The method should specifically provide for the researcher’s own ongoing reflexivity and the reflexivity of the research participants to ensure a level of authenticity that is acceptable to the research participants.
4. It should further enable exploration, clarification and validation of data to ensure that the prime focus of the research is the experience of the research participants’ learning.

5. It should produce data that potentially can be compared, themed and generalised across a sample to facilitate the application of learning to the coaching profession.
6. It should enable the possibility of developing a theory that emerges from interaction with the accounts of the research participants.

4.2. A Brief Review of Relevant Research Methods

The process of selecting the most appropriate research method for this inquiry was informed by the works of Willig (2008), Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2010), Charmaz (2010), Wertz et al (2011), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Riessman (1993), Braud and Anderson (1998), Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2010).

Methods such as case studies and action research were considered as possible research methods but not used for the following reasons.

The case study approach has a particularly specific focus. As Willig points out (2008, pp. 74–75) its parameters of exploration are specific to a particular context and time period. There is no doubt that case studies can lead to theory.

Furthermore, there is little doubt that they can serve as an inspiration for further research and subsequent theory generation. However, case study investigation is not an appropriate research method here. This inquiry is focused on the meaning ascribed by individual leaders to their learning experiences over an indefinite period. It does not seek to validate the impact or authenticity of that learning through multiple sources (triangulation) and it does not restrict itself necessarily to a specific context. However, what may be valuable further research would be a case study approach to test a) any theories that may emerge from this study, and b) how the impact of the learning experienced by the leader has been experienced by colleagues within a specific temporal and cultural/institutional context.

Action research with its emphasis on change, on raising or solving problems through joint actions by professional practitioners and researchers has little relevance to the focus of this research project. It may uncover the meanings attached to the experiences of the participants, and it may even access particularly

intimate expressions of those experiences but it neither specifically provides the space for this form of meaning-making nor does it provide the opportune process for comparing and finding themes in data for the purposes of theory generation.

The options that emerged as closer matches for this research analysis were:

- Narrative inquiry/narrative analysis
- Intuitive inquiry
- Discourse (discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis)
- Phenomenology (descriptive and interpretive analysis)
- Grounded theory (positivist, post positivist, constructivist)

4.2.1. Narrative Research

Willig (2008, p. 133) points out that much, if not most, qualitative research involves working with memories in one way or another. This inquiry will also access memories; the source of the data to be analysed here will be the narratives or articulation of past experiences of top leaders.

The story itself becomes a key focus in narrative research. The structure, organisation, language and tone may all provide strong clues to the narrative researcher regarding the meaning the participant is attaching to a particular experience. Riessman is quite clear about her emphasis on looking for meaning within the text: "I start from the inside, from the meanings encoded in the form of the talk" (1993, p.61). It appears therefore that it is from the text that she looks to extract the depth of emotion and meaning of an experience. If this research were seeking to primarily access the passion and depth of feeling of the participant then analysing the "encoded meanings" in the text, narrative analysis would be an appropriate method. However, does that approach assist in understanding the *learning* attained from the experience and how it was developed and applied since then? There seems to be a basic assumption within this form of enquiry that the research participant will introduce the learning experience(s) that mean something to her 'at the time of telling'. Narrative analysis does not, therefore, seem to enrich items 4–6 of the criteria identified above.

There is also a further reservation with regards to narrative analysis. If one of the criteria for suitability is "exploration, clarification and validation of data to ensure that the prime focus of the research is the experience of the research participant" then the manner of that validation should presumably be recognisable to the

research participant. The concern here is that if one focuses on the “meanings encoded” (Riessman, 1993, p. 61) in the text, the participant will perceive they are being asked to validate a technique rather than the content.

Be that as it may, there is little doubt that awareness of those linguistic and structural codes or what has been called the “story grammar” (Willig, 2008, p. 133) would be very useful to help maintain reflexivity in any hermeneutic analysis of a personal experiential account.

4.2.2. Intuitive Inquiry

Much has been written on intuition, what it is and how it is expressed (Hensman & Sadler-Smith, 2011, p. 52; Kahneman, 2011, p. 27; Nimtz, 2010, p. 362). Our interest in it as a possible method for research is that intuition is often connected to expertise. Kahneman (2011) talks about valid intuition being an experts’ way of unconsciously “recognising familiar elements in a situation and acting appropriately” (p.27). For example, it can be argued that it is no coincidence that Archimedes made a valid ‘eureka’ intuition: he was, after all, an expert mathematician and weapons designer who had been *looking for a solution*. He didn’t *jump* to a conclusion as much as *bake* one. Presumably the top leaders in our research are ‘experts’ in what they do and it would be logical to conclude that they use intuition quite a lot in making the decisions they do. There are ways of researching intuition such as Anderson’s five cycles of interpretation (2011, p. 249). Indeed much of that method could well be appropriate for this inquiry. However, on closer examination, it is clear that intuitive inquiry looks to produce knowledge based on the *researcher’s* ‘sensitised judgement’ around an ‘imagined dialogue’ with the texts rather than on the learning expressed by the research participant. This would certainly be a useful method to consider were the research question to have been centred on enhancing a coach’s valid and robust intuition in uncovering client issues but would not be an appropriate fit for this study.

4.2.3 Discourse Analysis (Discursive Psychology and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis)

Both McMullen (2011) and Willig (2008) identify the two main streams of discourse analysis as 1) those rooted in social psychology, and 2) those rooted in Foucauldian discourse analysis. Both forms assume that language is part of the construction of reality. What Willig calls “discursive psychology” (2008, p. 92) therefore looks to

understand how people use their 'discursive tools' in texts to "achieve interpersonal objectives in social interaction" (2008, p.96). In discursive psychology, phenomena are, to use Willig's wonderful phrase, "talked into being" (2008,p. 108). Research conducted by this method looks to produce knowledge of the processes in very specific contexts of everyday interaction.

Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) places its lens not just over the specific linguistic context of what is under review but widens its scope to look at the historical context, subject positions, relationships of power, institutional norms and dynamics. A discourse on the relationship between client and coach would therefore be analysed not simply via the language used but via a wider understanding of how the institution or society in which the discourse is situated views the relationship between client and coach. I have sympathy with the Foucauldian assumption that "all forms of knowledge are constructed through discourse and discursive practices" (Willig, 2008, p. 126).

However, it appears that both discursive psychology and FDA are much more concerned with uncovering the *tools of constructing* knowledge rather than the knowledge itself and more interested in language as the medium of learning rather than the learning. At the heart of this research is understanding *what* these leaders experience as key learning. If we go on to uncover, in addition, the tools they use to construct that learning then reflexivity informed by FDA may, indeed, be useful.

4.2.4. Phenomenology

The social constructivist foundation of this work clearly places it within the phenomenological method, as does the focus of interest of the research question itself. My position is aligned with Heidegger's approach according to which all "truth and meaning-making happen in time-bound human experience" (Keller, 2004, p. 11) as a result of interpretation from the standpoint of 'being-in-the-world'. This fusion of hermeneutics and phenomenology is most appropriately applied in the method known as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Smith, Flower and Larkin (2010) spell out the focus of IPA: "IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience in a way which as far as possible enables

that experience to be expressed in its own terms" (p. 32). That statement alone fulfils the first of the criteria, outlined earlier, for a suitable method.

IPA's strong identification as a hermeneutic method for "the understanding of lived experience" (Eatough & Smith, 2010, p. 179) logically fits the second criterion: the experience will be reconstructed and may well be co-constructed in the telling.

As regards the third parameter, stipulating the ongoing reflexivity of (particularly) the researcher, the writers cited in this section (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2010; Eatough & Smith, 2010; Willig, 2008) make no specific reference to reflexivity in IPA. However, it would be reasonable to assume that any qualitative research method, particularly one that is hermeneutically based, would find itself in difficulties were the researcher not to make space for reflexivity – whether over ethics, process or the impact of assumptions.

The concern over IPA's ultimate suitability for this research begins to arise with IPA's strongly idiographic stance. If IPA is essentially idiographic in its focus, then what is the point of conducting research with a sample of more than one – other than to draw comparisons? If those comparisons reveal themes then what are we to do with them? Do we remark on them as a curious coincidence or do we begin to consider the possibility of a theory emerging from those themes? For IPA to embark on the latter route would be to contradict its idiographic core and become virtually indistinguishable from constructivist grounded theory.

IPA's value lies in enabling deep understanding of specific themes. Its value is, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2010) express it, is in "offering detailed, nuanced analyses of *particular* instances of lived experience" (p. 37) and it can be recommended for case study research.

Although this inquiry focuses on a particular *theme*, the experience of learning, in reality, is very far from being a particular *instance*. The instances of learning, the experiences themselves and their contexts are expected to vary widely in this research. Therefore, if this work is to achieve its purpose, one of the criteria to be satisfied is that it enables the comparison and generalisation of themes across a *variety* of instances. The purpose of this research is not to enable "detailed, nuanced analysis of *particular* instances of lived experience" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2010, p. 37) which IPA excels at, but to inquire whether there are

commonalties that occur *across* instances that can be applied in the practice of coaching leaders.

The second issue pertains to the sixth of the method parameters. The research method needs to enable the possibility of theory development. IPA may, by its detailed examination of specific themes, *prepare* the way for further research that leads to theory but it does not lend itself to theory development itself. It was therefore decided to look further for a suitable method.

4.2.5. Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was initially developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to provide a robust alternative to what they saw as the primacy of verification in both quantitative and qualitative research and theory generation, particularly in sociology. Qualitative sociological research methods were seen as unreliable and, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), relegated to supplying “quantitative research with a few substantive categories and hypotheses” (pp.15–16). In a brilliant shift of the paradigm, they removed the primacy of verification by proposing a method in which the theory was ‘grounded’, or ‘discovered’ in the data. In the epilogue of their joint book they summarised the ethos of grounded theory in the sentence: “The simple fact that one cannot find the data for testing a speculative theory should be enough to disqualify its further use” (p. 262). The “theory should fit the data” (p. 261) they insisted, and not the other way around.

Of course, almost as soon as it was proposed, grounded theory not only generated a robust academic debate but it also led to the parting of Glaser and Strauss over a number of issues. Willig (2008) identifies these as involving “the role of induction, discovery versus construction, and objectivist versus subjectivist perspectives” (p. 43).

Induction

The issue of induction was also, it seems, the old problem of verification rearing its head again. If the theory is ‘discovered’ in the data, how does the researcher ensure that both the data and the discovery are verifiable? Strauss and Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) produced a particularly rigorous process of analysis that through its exacting detail appeared to create measurable veracity in the process if

not in the data itself. It rendered the analysis process quantifiable if not the data. Glaser's objection to this approach was that this elaborate analytical process distorted the data. One can almost hear the anguished plea in his statement that "If you torture the data enough it will give up! The data is not allowed to speak for itself" (Willig, 2008, p. 50).

Discovery vs. Constructivism

Can data ever speak for itself? If it can, then it can 'reveal' theories; concepts can emerge from it. If it cannot, then theories can only be constructed from it. Both Glaser as well as Strauss (and Corbin) approach data as 'observers', although Corbin, in her introduction to the revision of the third edition of her work with Strauss (2008) very clearly states, "I agree with the constructivist viewpoint that concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves" (p. 10). The process, for her, is a necessary collection of tools to ensure, at least "a conceptual language as a basis of discussion" (pp. 10–11). What both she and Strauss advocate is reflexivity by researchers on the impact they may have on the research participants, "the process, the method and the outcomes" (p.32). They also speak of 'sensitivity' as a combination of empathy and "immersion into the data"; a maturation process that eventually ends up in the researcher being able to say, "Aha, that is what they are telling me. (At least from my understanding)" (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p. 33). That sentence could be seen as an indication that Corbin and Strauss (like Glaser) retained a positivist outlook, seeing the researcher as cognitively interpreting the data while retaining reflexivity of their own 'distortive impact'. I am not convinced that is an entirely accurate description. It may, in fact, be as close as one can realistically get to *enacting* a constructivist position. Imagine the following:

A interviews B. The purpose of the interview is for A to understand what B considers to be a learning situation; how B experienced that learning; and whether A can construct a theory out of his analysis of the conversation with B. While B is telling her story (and in the transcript afterwards) A is listening, watching and sensing. He is in fact an active observer. He is also sensitive to the fact that his questions, presence, role, reputation and facial expressions may be having an impact on B. So, he either ignores the impact or he tries to temper it – in order to hear what B is 'really trying to say'. By

doing the former, he may be dramatically increasing the 'reconstruction/co-construction' of the narrative. By doing the latter he is making an assumption that there is an 'ideal objective truth' (what B is 'really trying to say.'), in which case, A is stepping into the role of positivist observer.

A question arises from this scenario: can one ever be totally constructivist *or* positivist? Or is all experiencing and learning – as postulated earlier in this work – dancing at the interface between the world and the individual? If that is the case, then are Corbin and Strauss correct in stressing the value of a process to enable that conceptual language for discussion and reflexivity? In fact, is the process of qualitative research as much about reflexivity as it is about analysis?

Subjectivism vs. Objectivism

Grounded theory has been put to many uses. Originally applied to "generate theory around social processes within defined contexts" (Willig, 2008, p.45), it has also been abbreviated to develop theory about the experiences of individuals. The question then arises: is it more effective to examine the experience of the individual through social processes, or the social processes through researching the experience of the individual? It seems clear that either is feasible. Relevant to this work, I agree with Willig's (2008) proposal that grounded theory research can be useful to "capture the lived experience of participants *and* to explain its quality in terms of wider social processes and their consequences" (p.45). In this regard it can be argued that where research participants belong to particular institutions or cultures, they tend to explicitly contextualise their experiences within those parameters. In this particular study, one would expect a military general, a corporate chief executive or a university president to situate their experiences of learning within, or at least relate them to, their institutions. One would anticipate that the subjectivist/objectivist dilemma would not be an issue.

Selecting constructivist grounded theory as a method

My social constructivist epistemological stance makes it inevitable that the positivistic/objectivist grounded theory method would not be selected for this inquiry. If that approach were to be taken, the assumption would be that the theory could be discovered in the data. This in turn would lead to the question: How do I know I am being told the truth? If that 'truth' were to be accepted as given, then it would inevitably lead to the problem that 'truth' – by definition – is acontextual and generalisable. This researcher agrees with Charmaz' (2010) concern that "seeking

decontextualized generalities also can reduce opportunities to create theoretical complexity because decontextualizing fosters (over) simplification" (p.134).

Constructivist grounded theory combines, in balanced measure, rigour of analysis together with sensitivity and reflexivity.

Charmaz (2010) does not see her version of grounded theory as a short cut. Her process is as painstaking and complex as that of Strauss and Corbin even to the extent of adapting (not adopting) their construct of "axial coding" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195; Charmaz, 2010, p. 61). As regards reflexivity, Charmaz (2010) spends considerable time on suggesting ways to develop theoretical sensitivity. She strongly recommends coding "for action" rather than (initially) for "themes" (p. 135–136); she advocates "openness to the unexpected" (p.136); she points out that nothing in constructivist grounded theory precludes "being reflexive to the impact of power" (p.134), or language (p. 49) and that "grounded theories are strengthened by situating them in temporal and relational contexts" (p.18).

Hence, I have chosen an inquiry using constructivist grounded theory as a method that focuses on the expressed experience of research participants as data, to construct "analytic categories, analysis and inductive theories" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 187) by comparison and generalisation within and across social contexts. This approach meets all the criteria set down earlier as a suitable method for this research.

In selecting constructivist grounded theory, I also included a set of quality criteria with which this method is identified and to which I aim to adhere. These include:

- Data

I agree with Charmaz (2010, p.18) that the "depth and scope" of the data are important. As she goes on to outline, the data collected should be pertinent and rich enough to ensure that there is a clear understanding of contexts, actors and views. As regards the scope, while recognising the underlying contextuality of grounded theory there should be a large enough range of participants to enable comparison of data produced. 'Large enough' could well be 2 in this instant but I have chosen 10 because my interest is in comparing leaders within and across these sectors.

- Data Gathering: The Interviews

While constructivist grounded theory provides that narratives may be co-constructed it is vital to ensure the participants are enabled to articulate the focus of this research: their experience of learning. Charmaz (2010) calls for alertness to power relationships, perceptions and other dynamics. In doing so one is not being neutral or a passive listener but *seeking* to enable articulation. If the participant does not wish to disclose information, this does not reduce its quality (unless of course refusal is prevalent in the sample). In fact such refusal should be respected. In gathering and analysing data, it is recognised that theoretical saturation is, as Willig puts it, " a goal rather than a reality". (2008, p.37) but this study will endeavour to reasonably strive for that goal.

- Data Processing and Analysis

I am in sympathy with the appeal by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for the systematic analysis of the data although, by following the constructivist approach, I clearly do not adhere to allowing the theory to be 'discovered'. However, the process from recording to final construction of the theory needs to be systematic, transparent and reasonably consistent across all participants. The process itself is detailed in Chapter 5. An important criterion of quality, in this research, is that the analysis of the data is referred back to the participants for their comments. If they do not recognise the analysis – or flatly disagree with an interpretation –this must at very least be included in the process. Where they feel their confidentiality is threatened, passages may be excluded. Charmaz (2010) sees the interviews as a negotiation. I believe the way the entire process is negotiated is a measure of the quality adopted.

- Conclusions and Theory construction

It is recognised that a criterion of quality for the entire process is the level of reflexivity maintained by the researcher. This can be assessed through memoranda, the level and quality of interaction with the participants and the contextualization of the findings. It is a measure of quality for constructed grounded theory that the proposed theory is constructed from the data rather than 'discovered' within it (Willig, 2008). Therefore, as Charmaz (2010) emphasises "the theory *depends* on the researcher's view" (p.130). However, the way that researcher reaches that conclusion – and the

transparency of the process – must surely be a measure of its quality although not of its generalised validity.

4.3 Data collection design

In seeking to access what leaders personally experience as learning it is clearly crucial to gain access to (and understanding of) the individual construction and articulation of that experience in as unfiltered a way as possible. By 'unfiltered' is meant a channel or method by which there is direct access both to:

- a) the articulation of the meaning attached to the learning; and
- b) the meanings/constructions of the concepts, language and definitions used by the research participant in his/her articulation.

This would seem to exclude a number of methods generally available for qualitative research, for example, methods such as non-participant observation and focus groups. The most apt choice remaining would appear to be individual interviews with reflexive awareness of the elements of meaning-making, enabled by narrative and discourse. The personal interview provides a safe, intimate platform for the data to be expressed while both narrative and discourse can help enable awareness of the participant's tools and language of meaning-making.

However, the form of the interview – notwithstanding the level of trust established between researcher and participant – can actively inhibit the objective of the research. A structured interview would almost certainly fall into this category if it depended upon the researcher's pre-set questions for its direction rather than on openness to the participant's articulation and interpretation. A semi-structured interview consisting "of a relatively small number of open-ended questions" (Willig, 2008, p. 25) would clearly be more accommodating to the personal expression of the participant. Nonetheless, it too may be less appropriate to this study than "the episodic interview [that] facilitates the presentation of experiences in a general, comparative form and at the same time it ensures that those situations and episodes are told in their specificity" (Flick, 2009, pp. 208–209). Flick attempts to combine what he calls "episodic knowledge" (associated with specific experiences) and "semantic knowledge", concepts generalised from assumptions. Flick's method

enables the participants to “ensure that the story being told in the narrative interview is in the form, shape and style most comfortable for the person doing the telling” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 218).

The approach envisaged for this research inquiry is by no means passive. The ‘episodic interview’ grants the space to both researcher and research participant to probe the meanings of language and situation; to maintain sensitivity to power relationships and contexts and to be reflexive of both the “multiple selves we bring to our research” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 135) as well as, logically, the ‘selves’ the research participants bring to the interview. The episodic interview, it would appear, provides both the platform for the research participant to express herself comfortably (King & Horrocks, 2010) and the space for active reflexivity. Flick extends this space by recommending that the participant be briefed on both the form of the interview as well as its purpose (2009, pp. 209–210). However, his suggestion that one prepares “an interview guide” (pp.209–210) may be in danger of over constraining the very fluidity he tries to create. A final argument in favour of using the episodic interview is, as Flick confirms, that the data can be “analysed with the methods of thematic and theoretic coding” (2009, pp. 213–214).

The episodic interview bears some important similarities to the form of the first interview conducted by coaches with a newly contracted client. Peltier (2001, p. 10) calls it an “I am interested how you came to be this way” conversation. Similarly, the episodic/narrative interview does not seek to know the participant’s entire biography, her entire learning experiences. Instead it can be seen as an: ‘I am interested in the learning experiences/episodes that brought you here’ conversation. To align this more closely to Peltier’s phraseology: I am interested in the learning experiences that you personally consider to have resulted in how you came to be this way. The participant may choose to focus on one episode or she may choose to link a number of episodes. They all flow to the current leadership position – how you came to be this way. Where this form of research interview crucially parts ways with the first coaching interview is that the researcher is not trying to enable change in his participant; he is alert only to understanding, in as unmediated a way as possible, the learning experience(s) selected by the participant, the meaning she constructs – and how s/he applies the learning in leadership. The difference is critical: what is the focus of the interview? Is it to facilitate change in, or to construct understanding of, the participant? So, for example, coach or client may experience an episode as a basis for incongruent behaviour that needs to be changed, whereas researcher and research participant may experience that same episode as key learning that should be explored with an

open mind. This is yet another instance of the need for the researcher to ensure alertness and reflexivity both before and during the interview.

In summary, the method selected for this research is an adaptation of the 'episodic interview' as outlined by Flick (2009) in which the research participant is invited to narrate what she considers at the time of telling as the key episode(s) of her learning in "the form, shape and style most comfortable for the person doing the telling" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 218). The narrative will be supplemented by questions from the researcher to ensure that he understands as closely as possible both the construction of that episode and the language and definitions used as construction tools.

It is a method that combines the ingredients of the semi-structured interview and the narrative with the alertness enabled by (Foucauldian) discourse analysis and phenomenology, particularly with regard to "subject positions", (eds. Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2010, p. 102), power relationships, intentionality and focus. The reflexivity required for this method is considerable at all stages. What is also required is a clear briefing conversation on engaging the research participant and, when necessary, before and during the interview(s).

A key limitation of the method is that my interests may result in my focusing on a particular learning episode, which the participant may not regard as significant. This again speaks to the requirement for my alertness to ensure that the research participants both select and tell their own stories of learning. Another key limitation is that in dealing with very senior leaders I may be inhibited by their depth of knowledge and even celebrity. Again, it is a matter for reflexivity but as I have extensive experience of senior corporate leadership, both personally and as a coach, that is less likely to occur. Similarly, the reverse is unlikely if the sample of research participants is drawn from top leaders with considerable authority and experience in exercising judgement. They are hardly likely to be deferential to an interviewer whatever their relationship with him.

Chapter 5. Process and Procedures

5.1. Overall approach and engagement

Having concluded that the research question would be answered through data analysed within the terms of social constructivist grounded theory and gathered by episodic interview, the next consideration was the nature and size of the sample to be considered. The aim of the research is to gather in-depth, qualitative data rather than statistically comparable data across a wide sample. For this reason, it was considered appropriate to restrict the sample to ten individual leaders within three sectors of public life. It was also decided not to attempt to make specific provision according to gender, race, ethnicity or cultural contexts. The interest of the research study is on the learning experiences of leaders *notwithstanding* any such categorisation. However, it is important to note that a reflexive approach will not ignore factors, including race and gender that the research participants express as having an impact on their learning.

In what will emerge as a limitation, this research focuses on leaders who live and work in developed or Western institutions. This is because the programme looks to inform coaching in the form that is largely practised in Western society, or, more accurately, coaching practised within corporations and institutions that are largely based on US, UK and European models. This does not mean that the leaders chosen should be restricted to institutions within Europe and North America; only that they are modelled on Western organisational templates. Similarly, it would be very surprising, given the globalised nature of society and the economy, if these leaders did not have to deal with both individual and social cultural differences within their own organisations. However, cross-cultural and gender issues will not form a particular focus of this study – unless, of course, the leaders themselves express them as such.

5.2. Explanation of terms

In reflecting on the overall approach to the process it was apparent that clarity was required on the key terms used (leader, authority and organisation), and the parameters of the sample (the role of the individuals, their level of authority and context within which they practised that authority).

5.2.1. Leaders, influence and authority

The research question formulated in the closing of the introduction to this work is explicit in defining the 'leader' as the individual who holds significant influence *and* overall authority in an institution or organisation. For the purposes of this research, 'authority' is vested with what can be described as structural legitimacy. Hence, I have chosen Kleiner's (2003) description of authority as the guide: "Authority is the power imposed from above in a formal hierarchy, and people agree to the rules of that authority, in effect, when they come to work there" (p. 674). Authority is formally imposed by the ranking created by institutions (military ranks, corporate chief executives and executive directors, university principals or presidents, and governmental cabinet ministers or state secretaries). The legitimacy of the *power* vested in that authority is derived both by the acquiescence of the stakeholders to that structural definition (as Kleiner implies), as well as in the ability of the office *holder* to persuade those stakeholders to "delegate authority and power upward to them" (Kleiner, 2003, p. 674). Lukes (2005) unravels what this means when he writes, "We need to know what the formal powers of officials are. But we also need to know what they can really do for us, or to us, if they choose, given what we know of their situation and character" (p.65). Certainly in the Western model, it is the combination of the office and the office holder that produces the authority and influence required to exercise power. This research does not seek to define the relative levels of impact within that combination but to understand the office holders' experience of learning. It also does not seek to compare the experiences of office holders relative to the personal influence or power they are able to exercise, and this could well be a useful research focus for future investigations.

In complex modern organisations, it is clear that power is normally vested in a range of leaders or core groups (Kleiner, 2003) at multiple levels, rather than in a single individual. This research, however, explicitly looks at the personal experiences of the holders of very senior leadership offices. Of course, it is anticipated that some of those experiences, having taken place in the interconnectivity of organisations, will certainly include interactivity with these core groups.

5.2.2. Context

The focus of this research is on the experiences of leaders within institutions or organisations. The particular interest of this inquiry is how top leaders experience the construction of the 'interaction' and 'continuity' of their learning within the social environment that is an organisation. This entails working with both the constraints and contradictions of multiple vested interests as well as what was described earlier as the combination of the office and the office holder, which produces the authority and influence.

In my experience the organisation or institution (as a relatively contained social context) produces often conflicting expectations of behaviour and performance that are a visible microcosm of the myriad instances of interaction and continuity that occur in everyday life. A CEO may have to deal simultaneously with the conflicting expectations of the principal investors (to dispose of the business), the smaller shareholders (to return a dividend), the executive board (to build the franchise), the creditors (to raise prices), the customers (to reduce prices) and the employees (to increase support staff). All of these interactions will have an impact on the continuity (including the learning) of all the players involved. The context is therefore 'the organisation', or more accurately the interfaces of the organisation, while fully understanding that the research participants' learning did not begin, and will not end, within the parameters of either the institution or this study.

5.3. Initial sectors

Initially, because of the author's particular interest, it was decided to invite active or retired leading office holders/leaders from the corporate, political and educational sectors. The appropriate level in each area was identified as follows:

- Corporate: the chief executive officer (or equivalent) of a profit or non-profit making organisation. As discussed above, it was recognised that certain CEO's may well have more 'authority' than power or influence but what was of interest to this research was how they experienced their learning within that constraint rather than how they executed their role.
- Political: a minister of cabinet rank in political charge of a government department.
- Educational: a secondary school principal, a university or college vice chancellor, principal or president.

Initial invitations to political leaders (see Appendix 1) produced no responses whatsoever, not even an acknowledgement. As detailed below it was then decided to replace the political sector with that of the military. The level to be engaged here was determined as at least equivalent to the rank of 2-star general, or OF-7 as per STANAG 2116 (2013, NATO standardization agreement, Edition 5).

5.4. Recruitment

5.4.1. The generals (G)

As discussed above, the initial sample selection was to include cabinet level politicians. By the time the research programme was approved, no politician had responded – favourably or otherwise. After discussion with my learning adviser, David Lane, it was decided to approach military generals of at least 2-star level or OF-7 as per STANAG 2116 (2013, NATO standardization agreement, Edition 5).

Through a former commander of the Royal Engineers Bomb Disposal Regiment, who is also a graduate of the DProf programme, I was referred to a retired general. This was followed up with an email (Appendix 2: email example) requesting a telephone conversation. In turn, this resulted in the general (G2) agreeing to both participation in the project and to a meeting in which an interview was recorded.

G2 then referred the researcher to two further very senior generals (G3 and G4) who agreed to a similar sequence of email, phone call and first interview.

A fourth general (G1), from Germany, was recruited via my wife who had been a colleague of his. This approach was followed up with an email, a subsequent telephone call and an exchange of emails in which G1 confirmed his willingness to participate.

5.4.2. The corporate chief executives (C)

C1: I had spoken by telephone to C1 a few years prior to embarking on this research programme. C1 was the CEO of a company in the same sector as one of the organisations I had previously led, although our paths had not crossed at that stage. C1 was approached by email during the very early stages of this project and asked if he would like to participate. He thought he would find it useful to reflect on his own leadership, and agreed.

C2: is a chief executive in the financial sector. She has been one of my coaching clients. She was approached by telephone after the programme was approved and asked whether she would like to participate, bearing in mind the existing professional relationship.

C2 was asked to reflect on whether she felt any hesitation due to that relationship. Her response was that she had no hesitation at all.

C3: is the chief executive of an international charity. She was referred to the author by A3, who then followed up by email and thereafter by telephone. On being briefed, she readily agreed to participate.

5.4.3. The academic leaders (A)

A1: was a very successful head of a schools federation and a national education leader in the United Kingdom. The researcher served on his school board of governors and had mentored (unpaid) some students at the school. A1 was approached verbally and agreed to participate without hesitation.

A2: is the president of a university in Europe. She was an executive coaching client of mine at the time of recruitment and when invited to participate was also asked to reflect on any conflicts she might feel with the professional relationship. She had no hesitation in taking part. The coaching relationship ended naturally after the expiry of the contract in 2011.

A3: is the president of a North American college. I have coached A3's senior management team and she had advised and facilitated workshops for me during my time as a corporate chief executive.

5.5. Ethical considerations

5.5.1. Confidentiality

It is a key element of this research that the research participants feel comfortable and confident enough to discuss their personal meaning-making in their learning experiences. I was concerned that such data/narratives be expressed as authentically as possible. To be able to do so, without defensiveness, undoubtedly takes courage. I also wanted to reinforce and protect that courage through the security of assured confidentiality. To this end, the following measures were taken:

The rule of confidentiality and the measures taken to maintain security were reiterated during briefings and before the first interview.

Confidentiality was confirmed by the consent form (Appendix 3).

All secretarial assistants employed by the author signed a legally drafted non-disclosure agreement (Appendix 4: NDA).

Research participants were sent an email asking for specific detail on the level of confidentiality they require (Appendix 5: confidentiality preferences). Each expressed these preferences.

Research participants were sent any or all extracts in which they are quoted or described to ensure that their preferred level of anonymity was strictly maintained.

5.5.2. Informed consent

The research participants were briefed on the focus of the research programme, the planned process and the mutual responsibilities it places on both researcher and research participants. All research participants were made fully aware of their right to refuse to participate as well as their right to withdraw. All participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 3).

Because this research project is so dependent on research participants' understanding and validation of each stage of the process, I have tried to maintain

a reasonable flow of information. Because of the significant amount of data and time involved in this project, this included contacting participants to update them on the status quo (Appendix 6).

5.5.3. Historical relationships

As discussed earlier, considerable reflection and thought has been given to the possible impact of historical, professional or personal relationships between the research participants and me. The reasons for deciding these do not have a detrimental effect on this research (particularly those relating to power and the assumptions of social constructivism) have also been extensively considered. It should be noted, that the research participants concerned were also asked if they had any misgivings. None of them voiced any hesitation in taking part. It is worth reiterating that the research participants are all extremely successful leaders with experience of authority and power. None of them displayed any excessive deference to me. In fact, as a practitioner who believes that the basis of coaching is 'a dialogue of equals', I am particularly alert to any imbalance of power.

What clearly remains vital is that I remain alert to any impact of historical professional relationships particularly in relation to power and authenticity.

Table 1 below briefly summarises the participants' profiles. I have kept it in the body of the work rather than as an appendix for ease of reference.

5.6. Research participants (RP) data

RP	Age	Gender	Rank	Sector	Institution: Current or at retirement	Active retired	location
A1	60+	M	Exec. head	Academe	Schools federation	Retired	UK
A2	55+	F	President	Academe	University	Active	EU
A3	50+	F	President	Academe	College	Active	North America
C1	45+	M	CEO	Corporate	media and	Active	International

					technology		
C2	45+	F	CEO	Corporate	International corporation: financial services	Active	EU
C3	60+	F	CEO	Corporate	International humanitarian organisation	Active	North America
G1	65+	M	Major General (NATO code OF-7) 2 star	Military	German air force	Retired	EU
G2	65+	M	Major General (NATO code OF-7) 2 star	Military	British army	Retired	UK
G3	65+	M	General (NATO code OF-9) 4 star	Military	British army	Retired	UK
G4	70+	M	General (NATO code OF-9) 4 star	Military	NATO/British army	Retired	UK

Table 1: Profiles of the ten participants

5.6.1. Commentary on participant data

The summary profile of this sample shows that participants have:

- Substantial formal authority in structured Western institutions

- Significant power and/or influence within their institutions
- Significant influence and respect within their social worlds
- An age range between 45–70

There is a total of ten participants: three each in the educational and corporate sectors and four in the military sector.

The only sector where men dominate is that of the military. Otherwise women are in the majority. It could well be a shortcoming of this work that there are no women generals, but according to the BBC (2013) the British armed forces did not have any women at the equivalent rank of 2-star general until August 2013. In addition, I have deliberately avoided any gender comparisons in this sampling. My interest is to discover whether common themes will emerge from the experiences of institutional leaders with power and influence – regardless of their gender, ethnicity or race. In fact, it can be argued that it would be more interesting to discover common themes across gender categories rather than within or between them.

The age levels of the participants is not surprising, given the time it takes to reach the level of seniority under investigation. As regards the fact that five of the participants are retired from active service, this may be significant within the social constructivist model in that historical learning experiences may be viewed with less anxiety for example, when seen from outside the pressures of active professional life. However, the advantage may be that they are able to view such experiences much more reflectively and even, holistically.

Overall, this sample does not contradict or inhibit any of the areas of focus within the research question. It represents leaders who have achieved significant influence and overall authority in their chosen institution or organisation. As regards the sample size, both qualitative researchers in general and, more specifically, grounded theory practitioners are less concerned with how (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) “representative their participants are of the larger population” (p.156) than with the quality and depth of the information that is revealed appropriate to the study. Charmaz (2010) emphasises the importance of “the depth and scope of the data” (p.18) and even suggests a series of questions researchers can ask themselves to evaluate their data. (pp. 18-19)

Reflecting on the interviews themselves, I found no discernable differences in my own levels of comfort or curiosity, or indeed in the flow of the conversations. My

interest was in the leaders rather than in the sectors in which they operated. Hence, my fascination was as intense in the discussions with the Generals as with the Chief Executives.

5.6.2 Recording of interviews and transcription

Table 2 outlines the process of interviewing, recording and transcribing interviews. The interviews were conducted as follows:

Participant	Interview mode	Recorded	Transcribed	Reviewed and corrected for accuracy only
A1	Face to face (121)	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
A2	Telephone	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
A3	Telephone	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
C1	Telephone	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
C2	Telephone	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
C3	Telephone	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
G1	Face to face	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
G2	Face to face	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
G3	Face to face	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB

G4	Face to face	Digital recorder	By PA	By SB
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Table 2: The outline of interviewing, recording and transcribing the interviews (SB = Stephen Barden)

All the interviews were recorded digitally either by IC recorder (ICD SX800) or on iPad via 'Dragon' voice recording application. They were then downloaded onto a computer as MP3 files and transferred by Dropbox to an assistant either in the UK or Germany. They were transcribed and returned to the researcher again via Dropbox. All recordings, other than those on the researcher's computer have been destroyed. I reviewed and corrected the transcripts. The research participants were also given the opportunity to check the transcripts when they were sent extracts of the relevant memoranda and themes (See 5.7. Data Analysis).

When initially briefing the research participants, it became clear that the initiating question, the 'point of entry' needed to be very carefully framed. For example, in the briefing the question was formulated as: "What are/were your personal experiences of learning as a top leader?" In thinking aloud about his response Academic A1 began to articulate the *impact* of the learning rather than the learning itself. After some reflection the opening question was standardised: "*Without thinking too much about it, what event or period of time (in your job or career) remains most strongly resonant with you?*"

Some responded by describing a relatively recent event in their current job. A2, for example, immediately addressed "the very beginning, leading up to my asking [a senior colleague] to step down. That would probably be one of the most important but steering experiences". Military general G4, on the other hand, remarked "With difficulty because I think... this process of learning is something that is laid down over a long term". Each interpreted the question according to their current priorities and perception. A2 responded in terms of her current post and the priorities it presented. G4, having retired, and having had the opportunity to reflect in writing and speeches on his own learning and that of his profession, saw learning not sparked by an event but by continuity. Either way the question provided an entry point both to the conversation and to how the research participant viewed their interactions with the world at the time.

Although the initial invitation to the research participants (See Appendix 1) stated that there would be three 2-hour conversations, in actuality one long interview was conducted with each participant followed, as outlined in 5.7 below, by a) email exchanges to validate the individual themes; and b) reflective dialogue and a short survey to validate the constructed themes and emerging theory. The utilised process emerged as being appropriate to the study and was clearly part of my learning to research.

5.7 Data analysis

The process of analysis followed here was constructivist grounded theory, particularly as recommended by Charmaz (2010). This structure leaves room for what Charmaz calls “the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon” (p.126) alongside a rigorous structure anchored firmly in the data.

The analytical process followed the following stages:

Individual transcripts

- 1) Reading and immersion in the transcripts
 - a) Initial coding
 - b) Focused coding and clustering
 - c) Coding for themes
 - d) Research participants’ comments and validation
 - e) Construction of interpretive themes
- 2) Across sample
 - a) Emergence of/construction of themes common across sample
 - b) Reflections by research participants and researcher and short survey.
- 3) Construction of proposed theory grounded in the data

A series of memoranda on each of the participants accompany the process capturing the analysis and the reflexivity of the researcher.

5.7.1. Reading of and immersion in the transcripts

The transcripts were initially read, up to a dozen times, without attempting to code. An entry in the author’s memorandum (for G2) reads:

I first read the transcript carefully line by line without attempting to code. Truth be told I was balanced between being too anxious to code, in case I couldn't see any coherent themes, and understanding (through my own experience as a coach) that if I waded in and tried to identify too early I would be imposing circumscribing labels rather than descriptive themes.

This 'suspended' stage appears to be similar to what Braud and Anderson (1998) call "incubating the data" (p.91); this is a stage during which the researcher relaxes his focus on the data in order to allow his intuition to develop.

What I found to be particularly useful – and in effect resulted in a word by word analysis – was to read the transcripts while listening to the recordings, and correcting original transcription mistakes. This enabled a re-entry into the 'co-construction' of the original interview, which in turn enabled me to punctuate the transcript to reflect my recall of the original statements more accurately. Riessman (1993), shares that she spends "considerable time" (p. 57) on this stage before moving on to analysis and coding. Doing this also provides the space, within the data, to reflect on the impact on the researcher as well as his impact on the flow of the narrative. An extract from another memorandum at the time reads, "This interview (A1) is peppered with questions of mine which missed the point or in fact could have diverted him from the narrative of his experience if he had not been clear in his own mind". Interestingly, I was learning how to do research by experiencing it: not just by conducting it but by reviewing it as well.

Finally, it would seem logical that where qualitative data is to be analysed it would be valuable to initially approach that data holistically, so as to situate it within the context it was generated – within a purposeful dialogue.

5.7.2. Initial coding

The initial coding was conducted by scrutinising the texts line by line to capture the flow or building blocks for specific topics. In 30 transcribed pages of one interview (A2) approximately 126 such phrases were extracted as part of the initial coding. Most of the coding was hand written on the blank page next to the text in hard copy. This coding page evolved in format as the analysis progressed to include

three columns: initial coding; focused and clustered coding; and final themes. The codes were transferred to a 'live' memorandum that grew to match the progress of the analysis.

In a sense this was both line by line, and incident by incident. It largely reflected the flow of the narrative by extracting what the researcher saw as significant verbatim phrases – as illustrated below in an example from A2 Table 3.

<p>"I realise throughout my time in school, I was always the leader"</p>	<p>A2</p> <p><u>No, no, now I realise throughout my time in school I was always the leader if you like. I went to a girl's convent, so I was a leader of girls. I wasn't in a classroom with a boy until I was at university, but I guess I was very much seen as a leader in those days, whether [that] was leading trouble maker or leading or - I wasn't always a leading goodie two shoes, even if I was responsible. <u>The nuns said they thought of me of something, someone, rebellious, but I had a strong personality.</u> I was always seen to have a strong personality back then. And to reinforce this actually, somebody recently sent me a photograph, a class photograph of when we were in class and we were about seven. It's a [big] classroom with about 50 kids, three to a desk, and a nun. And I showed it to [] and instantaneously he picked me out, he said the only girl in the class with her arms folded, and <u>I looked at that picture and my effect is very different from the girls around me.</u></u></p> <p>SBHow different?</p> <p>A2. Well, I was sitting there confidently</p>
<p>"Something, someone, rebellious, but I had a strong personality"</p>	
<p>"my effect is very different from the girls around me"</p>	
<p>"I had a powerful sense of self, even then"</p>	

	with my arms folded and nobody else in the class sat like that, we were talking about whatever 40–50 seven year olds, and <u>so there was a sense of, I had a powerful sense</u>
"No, no it was a cocky arms folded".	<p><u>of self even then.</u></p> <p><i>SB.</i> And of taking on the world?</p> <p><i>A2.</i> Yes, yeah.</p> <p><i>SB.</i> That seems to be that image, folded arms, doesn't it, of taking, half protective, but also taking on the world.</p> <p><i>A2.</i> Yeah, yeah, <u>no no, it was a cocky arms folded.</u> [Laughs]</p>

Table 3: Example of initial coding

Charmaz (2010) recommends that the initial coding phase remains true to the data – but has no problem with setting up interpretational codes because researchers come to the research with skills and opinions (p.47–48).

I agree that one cannot approach the data entirely neutrally and so will inevitably select one comment, phrase or remark above another. However, to preserve, at the very least, the central tenet of grounded theory, 'staying close to the data' (Charmaz, 2010, p. 49), it may be wise to start one's analysis with the selection of direct extracts rather than interpretations. At first glance it appeared that the initial coding – by virtue of the structure of the conversation – was also clustered. This was largely true but also deceptive in that non-sequential potential areas of coding can appear. In the extract illustrated in Table 3, A2's focus initially appeared to illustrate what she called her "innate self-confidence". However, it also implicitly introduced another strong theme that was explicitly mentioned later: her belief that she was 'different', an outsider.

5.7.3 Focused and clustered coding

Charmaz (2010) regards focused coding as enabling the “understanding of larger sections and therefore concepts” (p.57) within transcripts. I used this as a two-step process in which the ‘focused’ coding finessed the initial coding into more “directive, selective and conceptual” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 57) codes and then narrowed them down further into clusters to prepare them for thematic scrutiny.

The initial codes illustrated in Table 3 were focused on the same page in the transcript, as in Table 4 (for ease of continuity example A2 is used again).

Initial coding	Focused coding	
“I realise throughout my time in school, I was always the leader”	“Innate self-confidence (ISC)	<u>No, no, now I realise throughout my time in school I was always the leader</u> if you like. I went to a girl’s convent,
		so I was a leader of girls. I
“Something, someone, rebellious, but I had a strong personality”	ISC and “outsider” (O)	wasn’t in a classroom with a boy until I was at university, but I guess I was very much seen as a leader in those days, whether was leading trouble maker or leading or - I wasn’t always a leading goodie two shoes, even if I was responsible. <u>The nuns said</u>

<p>"my effect is very different from the girls around me"</p>	<p>O</p>	<p><u>they thought of me of something, someone, rebellious, but I had a strong personality.</u> I was always seen to have a strong personality back then. And to reinforce this actually, somebody recently sent me a photograph, a class photograph of when we were in class and we were about seven. It's a big][classroom with about 50 kids, three to a desk, and a nun. And I showed it to [] and instantaneously he picked me out, he said the only girl in the class with her arms folded, and <u>I looked at that picture and my effect is very different from the girls around me.</u></p>
<p>"I had a powerful sense of self, even then"</p>	<p>ISC</p>	<p><u>SB</u>How different?</p>
<p>"No, no it was a cocky arms folded".</p>	<p>ISC</p>	<p>A2. Well, I was sitting there confidently with my arms folded and nobody else in the class sat like that, we were talking about whatever 40 – 50, seven year olds, and <u>so there was a sense of, I had a powerful sense of, self even then.</u></p> <p><u>SB.</u> And of taking on the world?</p> <p>A2. Yes, yeah.</p>

		<p>SB. That seems to be that image, folded arms, doesn't it, of taking, half protective, but also taking on the world.</p> <p>A2. Yeah, yeah, <u>no no, it was a cocky arms folded.</u> [Laughs]</p>
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Table 4: Example of focused coding

The terms 'innate self-confidence' and 'outsider' used as focused codes were employed by A2 herself. She says in an earlier part of the interview "Well, right, this sense of self-confidence. In the sense that, yeah, I can do things with an innate self-confidence. Yeah". In another section of the conversation she says "being an outsider is very much part of my persona" and goes on to describe how she was an "outsider" in her family, her college, her adopted home country and her current job.

Although focused coding introduces an interpretative construction, I consciously tried to retain the research participant's terminology. On reflection it seemed to be an attempt to remain tethered to the research participant's construction of events and thus a limit to the range of (and anxiety for) interpretation beyond the data.

Initially, I anticipated that focused coding would result in a linear narrowing down of the initial codes. However, the process of focusing 'in' resulted in making key lateral connections. Charmaz (2010) warns against seeing focused coding as being linear, since "some respondents or events will make explicit what was implicit in earlier statements of events" (p.58).

C2 (a corporate chief executive) shared that one of her first challenges, as a new CEO, was the fact that her personal judgement was continuously questioned by her peers. "They [peers and colleagues] believe they know everything better than me because they have been CEO's longer". She goes on to say, "I've never come out of my technical comfort zone before... I've never been so challenged on my judgement before". In the initial coding this could have been seen as the very common problem of technical specialists (in C2's case a chief financial officer) transitioning to general managerial roles. However, in starting to focus 'in', the possibility of

other links began to appear or more accurately, could be constructed. The comments on personal judgement were examined alongside further remarks that not only was the “job pushed upon” her and she “didn’t have a choice”, but her lack of confidence stopped her from getting clarity on what it actually entailed.

The question then arose whether this lack of personal confidence was simply a result of transitioning from technical expertise to general manager? If so, where did the powerlessness of “no choice” and “pushed upon” come from? In another part of the discussion, C2 talks about being brought up in relative poverty, which she calls a “stigma”. She used hard work, education and technical expertise to get out of the estate. In this context, she says, “My technical respect...the people’s technical respect for me is critical”. It was therefore important it seemed, without coming to any final judgements, to encode a link between personal judgement/confidence, technical confidence/expertise and powerlessness/no choice. Hence the focused coding for C2 was listed as shown in Table 5.

1. Technical specialism to personal judgement (PJ)
2. PJ challenged
3. Competing PJ's
4. Leading through PJ and personal credibility
5. Personal confidence in PJ
6. Common journey (CJ)
7. Learning to build 'common journey'
8. Lack of common journey
9. Impact of lack of CJ
10. Lack of mutual trust
11. Lack of trust to enable building of common journey
12. Lack of personal confidence (as against confidence in expertise)
13. Technical validation of past
14. Difficulty to validate relationships/personal judgement
15. Feeling of having no choice
16. Not being able to walk away
17. “One of the most competent CFO's...in the city... with the least self-confidence”
18. Value of technical expertise
19. Loss of value/loss of confidence
20. Roots of lack of self-confidence

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 21. Roots of no choice/powerlessness 22. The 'fall' (the internalised distress of her mother in 'falling' from relative affluence to poverty) 23. Escaping through hard work and building expertise 24. Staying 'loyal' socially 25. Difficulty of professional/social networking to gain trust/build common journey at work 26. Parenting (creating new world) 27. Protecting family from the fall 28. Creating new common journey 29. No choice at home 30. No choice at work |
|--|

Table 5: C2 focused coding

Focused coding slightly decreased the number of initial codes but there was no specific intention to do so at this stage. Attention was concentrated on beginning to conceptualise the expressions and to identify links with other concepts within each interview. However, I made a conscious effort to avoid using common names/codes/concepts across the sample – and to retain labels that were specific to the individuals concerned. Hence what may have been called 'a significant episode' in one interview remained 'the fall' in the coding of C2's interview. This was in line with Charmaz' (2010) warning to avoid assuming knowledge of what is "in the research participant's mind" unless she tells you (p.68).

Both initial and focused coding splintered the narrative while retaining its sequence. Certainly, focused coding introduces the *possibility* of restructuring the concepts in the data but it is only when they are later grouped together as interpretive clusters that the atomised conversation is actually reconstructed according to the analysis given to it. Charmaz (2010) talks about 'clustering' as a tool to order the material before writing. Because an important element of this research was the reflection by the research participants on both the interview transcript and my analysis it was felt to be important that they should be able to follow both within a recognisable sequence (i.e. the sequence of the interview). Therefore, clustering did not, at this stage, attempt to reconstruct the interview according to the interpretation given to it but remained within the original sequence of the interview as in the extract from the memorandum on C2 written at the time (Table 6).

- Transition from specialist expertise to personal judgement/credibility
- Challenge from and to peers on personal judgement because of lack of a common journey (or, more accurately, lack of a commonly accepted common journey)
- Lack of confidence in self rather than technical expertise
- Assumption of no choice
- Roots of no choice and lack of personal judgement confidence
- The experience of 'the fall'
- Escape from the fall through technical expertise and added value
- Remaining loyal socially
- Separating social and professional
- Creating a new world around family
- Building values around family
- Work to protect family from the fall

Table 6: Original clustered codes for C2

5.7.4. Themes submitted to research participants

It was on the basis of these clusters that the so-called 'final' individual themes were sent to the research participants together with a copy of the transcripts (see Table 7). As described earlier, the themes remained within the sequence of the interviews for the research participants' ease of access and cross-reference with the transcripts. A short interpretive narrative was also added to the themes. Table 7 is the summary of themes sent to C2 for her comments.

- 1. Moving from a world of technical specialism to personal judgement**
 - Whereas all confidence was embedded in her significant knowledge of her subject and where her added value to her organisation is tangible and measurable, now she emerged into a world whereby her ability to manage directly related to the credibility that she had among her peers and constituents as to her personal judgement.
- 2. Managing in a world of diverse personal judgements**
 - Not only did she have to work with this new way of managing and being judged but she found that there were peers who had their own personal judgements and who felt that theirs were as valid – if not more.
 - She trusted their judgement as little as they did hers because of a lack of a common journey – or a lack of a commonly accepted journey.
- 3. Building credibility of personal judgement**

- The lessons she experience[d] were that she could no longer use the technique of 'technical validation' that she had used before because of the relative nature of what was now being validated.
 - She recognised that trust needed to be built up by creating a common journey. (but)
 - She mistrusted their 'one company, one country' journey.
 - They would not let her build a common journey by proving herself beyond the technical expertise.
 - Her gender and isolation makes building trust through social/professional networking difficult.
 - She recognises that the lack of common assumptions meant that the scope of the CEO role was not transparent to both sides but feels she had no choice but to accept.
- 4. Assumption of no choice**
- Her 'no choice' stems from that fact she had no confidence to walk away. This is rooted in her own social economic background as a child (and fear of falling back into it).
 - She escaped that through hard work and making herself technically indispensable. However, without this expertise she remains immensely vulnerable. In fact, the person – as against the professional – has remained loyal [to this day] to those who mattered to her "up until she was 21".
 - Even her parenting is centred on protecting her family from 'the fall'.
 - Now this expertise is not as important as her person; her personal judgement, in which she has little confidence (but, ironically, huge experience).
 - Can she now experience her learning going forward by uniting the professional and personal?

Table 7: Example of themes sent to research participant C2

All of the research participants responded, either by email or phone. There were no objections to the themes sent, although three suggested or reflected on further categories.

A1 wrote: "There is no reference to my family life and it's as if I exist in isolation of having a wife of over 30 years and four kids".

C1 reflected on extending the meaning of an existing theme and suggested two further themes. He suggested that “listening to the ground” could also mean “being ‘grounded’ – not believing your own BS”.

G2 elaborated on a key concept (‘learning the geography’) and suggested he would be more comfortable with “finding out what is going on”.

All three participants had their points discussed and addressed.

Chapter 6. Findings

6.1 Overview

The process in this section continues to follow that articulated in 5.7.

It is not possible to divorce the construction of themes from findings in grounded theory. In the process of interpreting the data and therefore of rearranging that data to reflect the themes rather than the original sequence of the narrative or conversation, findings and the basis of findings begin to emerge.

This stage, therefore, sees the application of the researcher's constructivist approach to grounded theory – both in the identification and interpretation of themes across the entire sample and in organising the data in line with that interpretation. However, I strongly believe, both ethically and methodologically, that the research participants should at least be given the opportunity to reflect on both the constructivist transformation of their data and the theory that begins to be induced from it, even if they do not necessarily agree with it. Hence, the chapter on the research findings will include extracts of reflections and comments from the research participants. The researcher's final findings will also take such reflections into account. After all, if one of the themes strongly present across this sample is that these leaders make decisions in concert with strong advisers (as G2 put it, "I wrapped myself in the experience of my staff") then it certainly is incumbent on me to follow suit. Even if I insist that the final interpretations are mine, as a social constructivist I would have to acknowledge that nothing is mine alone. This chapter may, therefore, contain a significant amount of detail as both the process and the reflections reflect the developing narrative of the findings.

6.2. Construction of interpretive themes

While sticking to the content of the themes it was now important to group them according to the logical sequence of my interpretation of them. In this section, I borrowed from the idea of theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2010; Glaser 1978); not only do conceptual relationships between the 'categories established in the clustered coding' begin to be established but also "the analytical story moves in a theoretical direction" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 63). It is the process of positing an interpretive narrative on the analysis. This is certainly in line with Charmaz' (2010)

approach to constructivist grounded theory. She reconstructs categories according to her interpretation of both explicit and implicit actions, and statements contained in the data (p.146–148).

Was there a danger of moving so far away from the research participants' original statements as to divorce them entirely from the original data? There certainly was. However, this danger could be mitigated by a number of factors:

- The cross-sampled themes and emerging theory would be sent to the research participants for their reflections. If they felt even partly divorced from the themes they would be given ample opportunity to say so. Asking the participants to reflect in this way is in line with Charmaz' (2010) understanding of "*theoretical sampling*, which means seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory" (p.96).
- The reconstruction was based on the themes and content agreed by the research participants. The sequence and labels were adjusted to facilitate clarity for the researcher's meaning-making and development of theory.

Thus, the themes in Table 7 were reorganised to align with my interpretive narrative of C2's data. These are presented in Table 8.

THE CHALLENGE

- The shame of comparison (with her childhood peers)
- No choice, powerless

DEALING WITH/NEGOTIATING THROUGH THE CHALLENGE

- *Professional escape via*
- Technical expertise
- Hard work
- Concealment (of roots)
- *Social support via*
- Keeping the (old world) friends that mattered to her until she was 21
- Separation of professional and social life

IMPACT OF NEGOTIATING THROUGH THE CHALLENGE

- Failure to deal with shame can lead to concealment, which can lead to lack of trust in own personal judgement.

- Lack of trust in own personal judgement plus removal of technical expertise requirement can lead to lack of effectiveness of personal judgement.
- Concealment of roots and separation of social/professional life can lead to lack of opportunity to create 'common journey' with peers or even compare historical common journeys.
- No (common or comparable) journey to create a record leads to difficulty in credence of personal judgement and power.

IMPACT ON LEADING/LESSONS APPLIED

Family and social

- Building a new world
- The provider
- Strong values for family and children
- Protecting children from the fall financially, educationally, socially
- Strong nurturing of the more vulnerable

At work

- Minimum alliances with peers
- Loss of personal influencing and power
- Influence to change restricted to technical areas, compliance and social values
- Assumption of 'no choice' but to take what is given to her to protect the family
- Locked into powerlessness by the way she dealt with the fall?

Table 8: Interpretive themes for C2

It was found that all of the research participants' narratives could be constructed to answer the questions in Table 8, namely:

1. What was the challenge identified?
2. How did they deal with/negotiate the challenge?
3. What was the impact of the way they dealt with the challenge on their leadership/the learning applied to their leadership?

It is argued that the constructed narrative remained 'true' to the data in that the questions were answered based on, and interpreted solely from, the data provided by the research participant. For a further example of this see Appendix 9 where the interpretative themes of A1 are presented.

6.2.1. Comparison of themes across sample

Using the three-part template, the experiences of the research participants were then compared to see whether commonalities and/or areas for further investigation could be identified.

Initially, this comparison of themes was conducted across two large flip chart sheets (see Appendices 8a & 8b for images), which necessitated a further stage of re-immersion into the transcripts and earlier memos. (See Appendix 7 for extract from memo). Unlike the earlier analysis, I initiated the terminology at this stage myself, backed up, where appropriate, by quotations or terms used by the research participants. Table 9 illustrates the process used, utilising a selection of the sample.

	A1	C1	G4
The challenge	The 'mistake': system labelled him "a thicky" (was the challenge negotiating the mistake with his own "innate self-confidence"?)	Surviving as a miner underground	Feeding ("innate") curiosity in an uncurious society (Did this also drive 'making sense' of being blown up in NI?)
Dealing with the challenge	Did the best possible (boxing; social) Challenges: Self: (boxing and then retook O levels) others: enabled others to challenge him (mentors)	Listened to the ground: Became very alert to the reality of entire ecosystem: the ground, the people around him, the community, the specialists, the managers, the interdependence of	(Was this conscious?) Commissioned into a regiment that "encouraged curiosity" Continuously challenged and was challenged: Sandhurst (Keegan, Holmes, Simpson)

	<p>Stuck it out: kept going even when he "failed"</p> <p>Social support (gregarious, mentors)</p> <p>Did not blame self or others (the system failed)</p> <p>Reality: very clear view</p> <p>Negotiated through the challenge: I could see a way through this</p>	<p>them all.</p> <p>See also his comment of "being grounded": the reality of what is, and not what should be.</p> <p>Stuck it out/did the best possible until possible wasn't best: managing closing mine; looking after community.</p> <p>Social support: never isolated.</p>	<p>Rhodesia</p> <p>Continental and colonial army debate</p> <p>Holistic: Became increasingly aware of the ecosystem of war; the context of force; both theoretically and experientially.</p> <p>Social support/no isolation: mentors peers reports</p> <p>Doing the best possible until the possible is not best:</p> <p>After Rhodesia, even when deeply convinced of the principles of war and battle, continues to serve in current structure.</p> <p>Negotiator: not captive either academically or to the army but equipped with the language, skills and background to negotiate through</p>
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			both.
Impact on and lessons applied in leadership	<p>Continued to do the best possible even when the best was not possible (fired weak teachers, developed others).</p> <p>Changed the 'world' (if the system had failed he created a system in which failure was minimised.</p> <p>Holistic: understood the 'ecosystem' was not just school; it was the parents, community, national education.</p> <p>Maintained three-way challenges via mentors, teachers, parents, pupils, community, national and political figures.</p> <p>'Dip sticking self'.</p> <p>Social support: as above + family.</p> <p>Negotiated: on behalf of educating students</p> <p>was never captive to any interests in the system.</p>	<p>Continued to 'listen to the ground' to understand the mood of the people around him.</p> <p>On becoming CEO, intense awareness of responsibly for community.</p> <p>Continued to be very alert to greater 'ecosystem'.</p> <p>Extensive use of scenario planning and other inclusive decision-making.</p> <p>Sees detachment from dependence on owners as key: so as not to be captive to one set of interests.</p> <p>From then on becomes 'negotiator' on behalf of balance of interests.</p> <p>Continues to challenge and be challenged: dual HQ organisation.</p>	<p>As he moves into joint command roles, develops and implements 'holistic' approach: 'changing the world'/system?</p> <p>Continues to learn (Howard).</p> <p>Aware of (systemic) failures but does not internalise failure.</p> <p>Continues to be immensely pragmatic: doing the best possible when the best is not possible.</p> <p>Social support: continues to develop and maintain alliances without being captive.</p> <p>Continues to challenge and be challenged.</p> <p>Continues to negotiate his way through "dilemmas".</p>

Questions:	<p>Was his self-confidence (“I can see a way through this”) innate?</p> <p>Did he have a purpose, or was it to do the best possible until the possible wasn't best?</p>	<p>Did he challenge himself?</p> <p>What role did self-confidence play? Did he know that he would “see a way through this”?</p> <p>Innate?</p> <p>What about mentors?</p>	<p>Was the curiosity specifically to ‘make sense’ of the world he was living in?</p> <p>Does he regard it as innate and/or developed?</p> <p>Did he too know he would ‘see a way through’?</p>

Table 9: Example of comparable themes

6.2.2 Construction of common themes and emergence of theory

The themes (illustrated in Table 9 and more fully in the chart sheets in Appendices 8a and 8b) were then drawn together to produce a set of common or similar themes across the sample. These themes appeared to be present in all the narratives but in varying degrees. For example, one leader, (C2) who appeared to lack a strong advisory group within the organisation, had a strong cadre of friends who fulfilled a similar role.

Another emerging link at this stage appeared to be that those leaders whom this researcher regarded as strongly transformational (in that they demonstrably and significantly changed their leadership environments and even beyond) appear to be associated more strongly (and widely) with all these themes.

The twelve themes are provisionally listed and described below in Table 10. They appeared to have been present during and before the leadership positions

1. ‘Innate’ characteristics	<p>Academic leader A2 spoke of an “innate self-confidence” and a rational approach.</p> <p>General G4 talked of an “innate</p>
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	<p>curiosity". Both linked these attributes to how they dealt with challenges. A1's starting point in facing challenges as a leader was: "I've faced bigger issues before. I can get through this one". While this was not an innate confidence it was certainly one that had been with him from at least the age of seven. Whether this characteristic is "innate" or not, is less relevant than whether the participant had internalised it and believed it to be an integrated part of their persona.</p>
<p>2. Strongly pragmatic</p>	<p>When the best is not possible, they did the best possible. A1 was a good example of this when he took up boxing and became a social success when he was placed in the wrong class and deemed an academic failure. General G3 talked of helping to rebuild and maintain utilities and areas of government in the former Yugoslavian republic of Macedonia while waiting "for Milosevic to concede or decide he wasn't going to concede; in which case we were going to have to go and fight him". G4, who, as a relatively young officer, was exposed to some of the finest military academics, began to grapple with the debate of the greater contexts of war and then personally experienced the application of that debate when he was sent to lead a team to help transition and integrate the three armies involved in the Rhodesian war. When I asked him whether one could go back to the normal business of being in the army after those</p>

	<p>extraordinary experiences, he replied: "Yes you can", without a hint of discontent.</p>
<p>3. Three-way challenges</p>	<p>Participants constantly challenged themselves and others; and (actively) enabled others to challenge them – both before and during their ultimate leadership positions. A1, not only challenged himself by taking up competitive boxing during his time in a remedial class but ensured that he challenged and was challenged by teachers, parents, pupils, community and even politicians. In his interview he encapsulated that ethos with the words: "The school expects, the school expects, the school expects. Students, parents, school expect. So on the one hand the school is expecting and on the other hand this is what you [as students, parents teachers etc.] are going to get". G2 – while a Brigadier – ensured that his entire command team were tested every six weeks by problems set by his chief of staff (at brigade level) as well as by the second in commands in each of the battle groups.</p>
<p>4. Absence of isolation and unilateralism:</p>	<p>They sought social support (in early days support from friends, later from colleagues).</p> <p>They solicited and used experience of others. General G2 encapsulated this with the words "I wrapped myself in the experience of my staff".</p>

	<p>There was a strong theme throughout all the interviews of decisions being taken with the support of others. What in fact was totally absent from all leaders (even those who felt themselves quite isolated) was unilateralism, whether as generator of ideas, or as executor of actions.</p> <p>When A3 took over the presidency of her college, she immediately set about developing a diverse network of people around her at all levels to ensure that she was able to make decisions with the best possible intelligence and discussion. Chief executive C1, in his interview, told of how he listened to the ground – both in terms of keeping close to what his people were thinking around him but also “keeping himself grounded”. This lack of unilateralism did not mean that they did not take decisions against resistance but they were aware of – and had weighed – that resistance. C3 told of how, earlier in her career, she took a decision to raise prices against so much resistance from her sales team that “I felt like I was taking on 20 bad guys and karate chopping my way through”. However, before taking that decision she had listened carefully to the arguments.</p>
5. No internalisation of failure	<p>They did not identify themselves with the defeat or disappointment of failure. They learned and moved on. As CEO C3 put it, “I’ve found that great leaders course correct very quickly if they find</p>

	that they made a mistake". A3 admitted to always having a plan B. G3 learned from sailing to "never give up and be prepared to take an extreme course".
6. No blame	There was a remarkable absence of blame. Even when they were patently 'let down', they tended to avoid blaming others – seeing it as a waste of time. In none of the interviews was there any implicit or explicit reference to blaming others.
7. Reality	An intense sense of what <i>is</i> rather than what ought to be, or might be. This was not a lack of vision, but the ability to clearly see the status quo without wishful thinking. General G4's description of his work in restructuring the three armies in Zimbabwe after the revolution displays an extraordinary sense of the reality on the ground: of the size of army the country could sustain, of having to make space for guerrillas held back in the bush in case the Lancaster House Agreement broke down and in deciding the training that needed to be done and at what level.
8. Holistic	This was not simply the 'big picture' but a realistic understanding of the linkages within the greater 'ecosystem': be that the theatre of war, the local and national contexts of education, the corporation as economic, social and political 'ecosystem'. This was certainly present in their leadership – and in many cases was a 'perception in progress' earlier in their lives. CEO C3 realised that the

	<p>organisation she had recently taken over was much more than its beneficiaries, donors or even staff. She ensured that some 40,000 members of the organisation were canvassed to understand and participate in the changes she knew she had to implement. CEO C1, in his interview, spoke of a “whole ecosystem out there and that there are all these other stakeholders who are absolutely essential to the basic fabric of the company and its wellbeing and health and welfare and growth”. Academic A1 understood from a relatively young age that success in the school did not just mean good teachers or syllabi but behaviour and expectations within the community. It did not end there: he knew that the linkages extended into education, civil servants and the politicians. So he made sure his awareness and presence was in all these areas. Both Generals G3 and G4 spoke extensively about the contexts of war and battle within the greater theatre of economics and politics.</p>
<p>9. Alert to constituents</p>	<p>The leaders demonstrated an alertness to what was going on around them from relatively early in their careers. This continued into their leadership where they talked of ‘listening to the ground’, ‘walking the corridors’, having ‘trustworthy spies’, ‘listening to the buzzing in the woodwork’, ‘conversation by headset’. General G3 described this alertness as “You have to have a sense</p>

	<p>of mood, understand what has happened, why people, may be of the mind that they are”.</p>
<p>10. The negotiator-navigator</p>	<p>The participant outsider or the non-captive insider. While being able to use the language and behaviour of the discourse, they were not captive to any specific interests in the environment. One leader called it ‘balancing the dilemmas’: the interests of the ecosystem and their ethical sense of what is right.</p> <p>In the sense of navigating their way through a problem. (This appeared to be present both during earlier challenges and in leadership.</p> <p>This related to a number of other characteristics. If they were negotiators, why would they internalise failure or blame? Would they not – as negotiators – be wise to work on a basis of well-researched reality (utilising advice, support, their own antennae and challenges)? And would they not tend to pragmatism: to do the best possible even when the best was not possible?</p> <p>This characteristic was evident not just in the way they negotiated with the ‘outside world’ but with themselves. Academic leader A2 took on relatively unpleasant jobs to pay for her university tuition fees – on which her friend gave up after a weekend of “being treated like dirt”. A2’s attitude was that she would play the role because she needed the money to pay for college. It could</p>

certainly be seen as resilience – and there was an element of ‘sticking it out’. However to this researcher, there was a stronger focus on a pragmatic bargains being struck: I need to pay my way through college and, uh, I need the money and that’s fine. I’ll do it.”

Corporate chief executive C1 spoke of understanding the value of “not being totally economically dependent” on his shareholders because “you can detach yourself from the things that maybe morally or ethically go against your own values”. One can, in other words, negotiate rather than ‘be captive’ to the organisation. Chief executive C2 navigated out of her childhood where she was “the only one who’s properly poor” at her school, by working hard to develop valued technical skills but found those skills were not enough when it came to negotiating her credibility as CEO. General G4 brings an additional and crucial perspective to the notion of navigation-negotiation by his emphasis on context. Strategy, he maintained, entails “managing the context as much as the text”. He tells the graphic story of a platoon sergeant who, on discovering that one of his men had lost his rifle, changed the context by making *all* his men ‘lose’ their rifles so that – of course – the whole camp (complete with truck and bright lights) was roused to find the missing weapons; something that would not have happened if only one rifle had been missing. A similar example was how government and the financial sector

	<p>managed the context of the banking crisis in 2008. One context was that the banks had over-specified on catastrophically defective financial packages. They had gambled unwisely and lost. Another context was that the pillars supporting society (otherwise known as the 'too big to fail' context) were about to come crashing down bringing us all down with them. In the former, the context was 'failed casinos going bankrupt'. In the latter, the context was 'catastrophe for society'. If the aim of government and financiers was to get the taxpayer to finance the losses, they would fail unless they created the 'social disaster' context. Solving the problem did not just involve the immediate crisis (the 'text') but first understanding and then managing its context according to the outcome required. This accords with social constructivism in that being-in-the-world entails navigation through <i>and</i> changing the world according to one's position <i>and</i> direction.</p>
<p>11. Direction</p>	<p>Rather than a sense of purpose or a specific target the participants seemed to have a sense of direction. So, for example, A2 talked about knowing that she wanted to "get out" of her childhood environment; another talked about wanting to be able to "run things so that conditions could be changed". A1 had what he called an "end game" in his head. Even then it seemed to be more</p>

	<p>akin to a direction than a target. This end game was to have a “really, highly functional, highly successful organisation which looks like the best you can find.” This may also be linked to ‘doing the best possible until the possible is no longer best’.</p>
12. Mentors	<p>At key stages mentors (older, more experienced individuals) advised, guided and challenged them. A1 benefitted from mentors from (at least his mid teens to when he took over his last school. All of them seemed to be both formidably challenging while strongly believing in him. His last (named) mentor was “a kick-ass woman” who supported and understood him. Academic A2 talked of sharing the qualities of the “the outsider” with her “intellectual mentor”. Mentors, it seems, were not just older, more experienced guides but individuals who challenged <i>and</i> identified with the research participant..</p>

Table 10: Twelve provisional common themes

Immersion within these themes led me to construct the beginnings of a very tentative theory or, more accurately, at this stage, a sequence of propositions.

1. Leaders experience their learning (and construct patterns for future learning) through the way they negotiate challenges in their lives. Some of these challenges may be objectively trivial but, because of their context, become significant for the leader.
2. The challenges themselves have less of an impact on learning than the way in which they are *negotiated or navigated*. They could range from single,

extremely traumatic incidents to ongoing, low level discontent.

3. In negotiating their challenges from an early age, leaders utilise a range of at least 12 identified characteristics and tools (see Table 10). Those leaders who display and/or utilise these themes *most widely* are also the most transformational in terms of their leadership.
4. The overriding learning characteristic of successful top leaders is that of negotiator, or navigator. Both require an intense sense of reality, understanding of context and alliances/support. In fact, both require all 12 themes described above to perform the role effectively.
5. An effective form of coaching emerging leaders would enable clients to recognise the development of their current pattern of 'challenge negotiation' followed by a programme that facilitated the navigation of real and simulated challenges utilising the 12 themes.

6.2.2.1 Final referral to research participants

After reminding the research participants by email of this final referral, a short narrative of the developing theory and cross-sample of themes was forwarded to each of them (see Appendices 9 and 10 for the narrative and a sample email including questions). In addition, specific questions were addressed to each to support theoretical sampling and saturation (Charmaz, 2010).

All those leaders who had not spoken of a challenge early in life were asked whether they could recall either a specific challenge in the form described by Mezirow (2000) as a "disorienting dilemma" (p.22) or "ongoing discontent which had triggered a fundamental review of assumptions".

The majority of research participants elected to reflect in a short telephone conversation. The exchange with G4 consisted of a number of emails to enable clarification and elaboration for all parties.

In order to obtain a relatively standardised measure of identification with the 12 themes, the research participants were asked to rate their strength of identification on a scale of 1–5 with 1 being the weakest (see Appendix 11).

They were also asked to briefly answer questions and comment on the themes and emerging theory.

6.2.2.2 Research participants' answers and reflection

6.2.2.2.1 Overview

As Appendix 11 shows, there was consistently strong identification with the themes or tools. The lowest mean rating was 4.05 (for 'no blame'), the mode was 5 and the highest mean rating (for pragmatic, holistic and navigator) was 4.9.

The telephone conversation was structured to enable the participant to understand the terminology and concepts used by both the researcher and, often, the other research participants, before rating each theme. They also answered the specific questions addressed to them in the email and were free to discuss and, indeed, challenge both the themes and the still emerging theory.

Overall, A1 and C1 summarised what appeared to be the general attitude of the research participants to the themes. A1 said: "These are not just individual characteristics and tools. They are always present – with different weighting according to the circumstances". C1 commented: "There is a continuous time residual aspect to all these tools. They continue to shape you long after you think they have faded. They are always there, together, in the strengths or intensity that you need them".

Certainly they are presented here as a package of tools, utilised as a suite but with differing emphases depending on the context. They are not a toolkit from which one or more individual tools are extracted to meet the current purpose.

In addition to the themes, the research participants were asked whether there could recollect an early experience, incident or even context which may have had a bearing on the way they dealt with experiences subsequently. These early experiences certainly overlapped with the first of the 12 themes. Although it had

been labelled 'an innate characteristic', it was meant to describe a characteristic that the research participants regarded as either innate or utilised over a long time, and therefore substantially internalised and integrated.

What was particularly gratifying was that the research participants had no hesitation in challenging both the concepts and the description of them. G2 for example, described my wording of 'innate confidence' as "clumsy". G3 and A1 were not convinced that 'no blame' was an asset, stressing that people must be held accountable. I was not able to persuade them entirely that there was a considerable difference between holding someone accountable and blaming. I was also challenged in no uncertain terms if it was felt I had misinterpreted them. G3 told me he was surprised that, under theme 11 (direction) I had stated, "No one talked of a long-term specific purpose". He pointed out that in military terms a purpose is very important, citing the purpose of the Falkland's War as "the restoration of British sovereignty to the Falkland Islands". My interpretation of that remains that the war actually focused on a short-term – in fact an *immediate* – purpose: to restore British sovereignty. It would be up to the politicians to decide, thereafter, whether that restoration was to be long or short term. Be that as it may, these research participants did not hesitate to question or challenge the themes or the emerging theory.

Of those who expressed an opinion, research participants appeared to prefer the term 'navigator' to 'negotiator' to describe their dominant characteristic. Both A2 and A3 were specifically concerned about the extensive connotations with which 'negotiator' has become associated. A1 and G2 regarded navigation as extremely apt to describe the characteristic of (A1) "finding different channels to get through to your destination". G3 pointed to what he saw as the similarities between the definition of navigation and the military strategic framework of "ends, ways and means", (Eilkmeier, 2007, p.63) where strategy is a pre-emptive process balancing the method (ways), resources (means) to achieve the desired outcome(s) (end). G2 had, in this researcher's opinion, a particularly acute observation: "Navigation is strategic. Negotiation is tactical. One of the tools of navigation is negotiation".

It should also be noted that in a number of themes ('blame' being one of the exceptions) where some research participants scored themselves relatively low, they were nonetheless strong advocates of that tool or behaviour. They identified with them although they may not have felt that they personally practised them 'sufficiently'. C1 scored himself '3' on 'mentors' because "I recognise the

importance of them. But while I have had one or two people in my life who have supported and challenged, I have mostly gone my own way". He did go on to say that his wife was probably his strongest challenger and supporter. C2 scored herself low on 'internalisation of failure' – in the short term – but then went on to indicate her aspiration towards it commenting, "it sometimes takes a long time but I learn and move on".

6.2.2.2.2. The themes

1. Innate characteristics or experienced navigators?

The first of the themes generated the most discussion both during the reflective dialogue with the participants and here. This is because it goes to the source of the way learning is experienced. If one has self-confidence then the inference is that one would have more confidence to explore, to take the lead, to initiate or to conclude, than one who does not have self-confidence. If that self-confidence is 'innate' then the inference is that one can be a 'born leader', or certainly that one has a head start on those poor leaders who learn along the way.

As discussed earlier, the use of the word 'innate' was not particularly accurate or, one suspects, useful other than to reflect the notion that some of the research participants expressed that an internalised characteristic was present that shaped the way they experienced their learning. If G4 identified this characteristic as "curiosity", and A2 as "rational self-confidence", how did it emerge? While the research participants may identify that characteristic as innate, constructed by experience or even declare themselves agnostic as to its source, it was surely valid to try and construct - from the data produced – whether specific incidents or contexts (or, more accurately, the interaction with specific incidents or contexts) could have 'set the course' for future learning? In specific terms, the interest of this research is as much about examining the way A1 dealt with the 'mistake', as it is about where he got the wherewithal to deal with it in that particular way. If this research is about the experience of leaders' learning then that must include their experience of the path that *led* them to that way of learning. This section, drawn from both the final reflections and the earlier interviews, attempts to construct a narrative from their interaction with childhood contexts to subsequent interactions within leadership contexts. They were all asked in their final reflection whether they could recall a specific or contextual challenge early in life, how they dealt with it and whether they saw any link between that and their later learning. All but one was prepared to answer that question. As can be seen in Appendix 11, the mean

rating given to this theme was 4.7, with the weakest identification being 3 and the strongest (from eight of the ten research participants) scoring it as 5.

The majority of participants, as detailed below, identified with this characteristic as an early mode of challenge navigation rather than as innate.

A1

Up until he was seven he 'ran around in the Caribbean bush' surrounded by a community who admired and considered his (absent) father (who left the island to support his wife and children) a significant other. "He was considered a success; the island couldn't contain his ambition to do better".

By the time he came to Britain there was no feeling of failure in his family. In fact he, his mother and older brother were just doing what his father had done: 'seeking to do better'.

He came from a community that respected and was loyal to his family. His father was not 'an absent father' but one who was unafraid to push boundaries to do better.

When he came to Britain he did not consider himself "inferior or downtrodden". So if this alien system made a mistake, that didn't make *him* a failure. He would just have to do the best possible – like his father. He became a champion boxer and a social success. Then when that wasn't good enough he decided (on his own) to stay down a year, retake his O levels and go on to challenge himself and others in a long and very successful career in education. His entire leadership reflected the interactions of those early years, consolidated by the way he was able to navigate the 'mistake': he created a 'total community' for the school that was loyal, respectful, challenging. He challenged the system at all levels to ensure that "no child was left behind". He applied in his late 20's for no less than 50 deputy headships to ensure that he was able to have some influence in the system.

A2

I originally interpreted that A2 was trying to be heard in a large unruly family. A2 – in her final reflection – disagreed: "I don't think I was trying to get myself heard in a large unruly family. Although we were seven I didn't see us as large. It wasn't as

if we were all clamouring around the table to be heard. I think it was more because I was a girl".

"I wasn't expected to be serious. Girls were not worth much. Boys were the intelligent ones; the beautiful ones; the golden ones. I had to prove my worth by being rational, serious and reliable.

[That was the stance you took to be heard?]

That was the way I could be heard as a girl".

The "rational, serious, reliable" A2 remained strong throughout her life.

When under huge pressure from a wide range of specialists to abort her baby when she was diagnosed with cancer, she reacted rationally: "I was systematic, got all the medical evidence and I fought all the religious arguments. It was a decision [my husband] and I made".

In her role as president of a university she says of former direct reports that she "assumed they'll act rationally to maximise their interest and they haven't done".

A3

A3 was one of two children. She was the "smart one" in the family. Her mother used to say, "she is the smart one. Her brother is the nice, likeable one".

Reinforced with "Don't let the boys know how smart you are" her stance became the "smart one wanting to be liked". She would not accept her mother's priorities entirely but decided that in order to be heard she would be smart *and* liked.

The way A3 navigates significant problems is illustrative of her use of the way she dealt with her early interaction: "There is a certain pattern with me. I try to solve it. Then I get anxious: 'nobody likes me'. Then I reach the 'fuck it' stage: 'let's fix it'"

A3 has combined the 'smart and liked' template to develop a career as a formidable university administrator and fundraiser as well as a writer of sharply pertinent but very accessible books.

C1

C1 was born into a family where the extent of his education, the subjects, his interests, and his choice of job (mining) held no frame of reference for his parents. They were 'in transition' from one social class to another with little or no supportive community around them.

C1 had a choice of either trying to find refuge in their frames of reference or pursuing his own. He chose the latter. He looked for his own sponsors, where to gain experience mining underground etc.

He also discovered at this time the difference between being in a school with no community ("pretty rough and a racial minority") and one "run like a grammar school and had a great sense of community". This was reinforced when he went to gain experience as an underground miner. It was – he says – "literally an alien body introduced to a host. The alien body either adapted or was spat out." He "mucked in", "gave as good he got" and thrived.

He created a template in which he was both the self-reliant explorer and the team player: a self-reliant team player looking to create a community; a leader unafraid to develop his own frames of reference but understanding that having a community with common frames of reference can be immensely powerful.

C1 says in his final reflection for this research: "The shape of my life long behaviour was, and is, self-reliance". In his current leadership post he has created one of the few successful 'dual headquarter' international corporations. On taking over as CEO one of his first shifts in perception was directly related to what he still calls the company's "community". As he put it, he realised he was "truly responsible for people's livelihood and their wellbeing".

C2

C2 was born on what she calls "a neglected" housing estate. Mother was the "poor relation of her family because she married badly".

They then moved to a council house in a middle class area where she was one of two children in the entire school who had "free school dinners" and had to stand in a separate line to get them.

C2 says "it's a huge burden to carry as a child". Not the absolute poverty, it seems, but the deprivation and 'shame' relative to the other middle class children in the area. "There is absolutely no doubt that at the core of my being is that vulnerable child who doesn't want to go back to being a free school dinner girl for seven years".

Part of the interaction at the time absorbed the embarrassment of comparison. She – as she put it – "window-dressed" the lack of presents, clothes or small luxuries. But she also started navigating her way upwards through her intelligence: "I was always referred to as the natural leader and she who asked questions. Don't possess a school report which doesn't comment on either if not both".

C2 internalised the shame of the early poverty while trying to escape it through technical skills and personal leadership.

C2 became a highly skilled and respected specialist in her field who thrived while she was able to rely on her technical skills. "People's technical respect for me is critical", she said.

This worked until she became a CEO. What was then required was self-confidence and shared frames of reference in her own personal judgement. The former had never been exercised outside her 'technical expertise' and the latter was inhibited by her cloaking ("window dressing") her personal–professional life from her colleagues. In the meantime, at home, she was the undoubted breadwinner and leader whose personal judgement was exercised effectively and consistently

C3

C3 describes her parents as having been strict, but loving a good debate. She tells of a number of occasions when she got her way by "pushing back hard". She said her assumption then and later in her professional life was that "everybody would engage in this debate". C3 also illustrates how mixed within this culture of robust negotiation was also a strong sense of ethics.

In her final reflection C3 tells the story of how as an "alpha girl" in the sixth grade she found herself being bullied by another alpha girl. When she talked to her parents about it, her father, in typical negotiating style, proposed a number of options: "You can slack off and drop down a stream so you don't have to be in the

same class. But you'll be grounded. Or you can study harder and go up a level and not be in the same class as her".

Equally typically C3 entered into her own negotiation: "Now I didn't care about being grounded and I quite liked slacking off. But then I realised I didn't have any friends anyway because of the girl's campaign so I decided I might as well go up a stream".

But with her decision came the ethical learning: she decided that even what she called the 'marginal' bullying she had exercised, as an alpha girl was no longer tolerable. "From being a marginal bully alpha girl I became a combination of being extremely nice and extremely tough".

The stance C3 appeared to take was of a robust negotiator literally, exploring the limits of negotiation ("I always used to push and push and push") with an equally robust sense of fair play.

Using the template of robust negotiation and fair play, C3 had to learn the vital lesson that not all people who don't push back were in agreement with her. By the time she achieved top leadership in her current role, this was particularly clear. Despite the fact that she had the majority of the board behind her to institute much needed changes in the organisation, she refused to do so until she had enabled staffers, volunteers and donors to have their say. She talks of transparency becoming a "calling card" of her leadership team: with donors, government, the media and her own people.

Interestingly, the organisation she joined as CEO is an international charity, well known for its ability to negotiate and mediate in very tough spots while working at the highest level of integrity.

G1

As a child he described himself as "small, thin, sick but intelligent". A perfect target for bullying – not helped by the fact that because of his father's job, he changed schools three times

In order to manage the bullying he "made deals with strong, less intelligent boys that I would assist them with their lessons in exchange for their being my guard".

This worked well until he was 12 when he turned up at yet another new school, where he became a target for bullying by another newcomer before he could muster his usual allies. He decided to take direct action: "I hit him and knocked him out – by pure luck". The bullying stopped. So he learned to broker others' talents as well as to act directly with courage.

He explicitly links the ability to broker skills by saying in his final reflection that "I learned to work with people of different talents. I always had people around me with different talents." He also took great pride in being able to take direct action – specifically to being able to fly as an aircraft crew member under the command of a more junior officer even when he was a 2 star Luftwaffe general. As a general, when he clearly did not need to, he flew in "dangerous areas "during the air bridge in Sarajevo. He stresses that it was the experience of working directly with his subordinates that helped him make decisions back at headquarters that were "not always liked by the people but needed". His ability to understand and manage what was going on in the "playground" was key: "Because I say you can write letters and orders as much as you like: the guy in the aircraft decides whether you fly right or left and if you don't reach their minds and hearts they will do it otherwise". Leadership for G1 remained focused on managing relationships, whether of crews under his command, or at staff headquarters or while an ISAF commander in Afghanistan coordinating a multinational and multilingual force.

G2

He was a reasonably successful student at school, but physically weak and overshadowed by his much more able elder brother. His childhood was disrupted aged 10 when his father suddenly died and the family was faced with relative poverty. His mother continued to send her sons to a fee-paying school, but it was a great struggle and this led him to apply for a scholarship from the Army.

G2 provides two strong and seemingly contradictory interactions with the crisis.

He reflected that these were defining events that made him very realistic about the world and more determined than most to forge his way in it, but overall rather timid.

In another key comment he says, "I developed an acute sense of reality; of what was really going on – as against my mother who never quite accepted the new situation. I was of the opinion that we needed to cut our losses and move forward".

His key positioning seemed to be:

Self reflection – what he called “hiding”

Observing – developing an acute sense of reality

Direct action–wanting to cut losses and move on.

Although he found Sandhurst very challenging, it was always an encouraging place and it was there that he began to gain confidence in himself and saw the chance to make the Army his career. He puts this down to a gritty realism born of his childhood and from “certain innate characteristics that were gradually emerging” (G2). He could be creative and often saw a solution and develop a realistic plan earlier than his contemporaries – these were useful military skills – and this was brought into sharp focus during an accident on Mont Blanc where he emerged as the leader of a group of peers to bring everyone to safety. Asked why this happened, he thought it was because he was the one who could see a way out of the problem most quickly. At this point he thinks he grew up and finally gained the confidence to make the best use of his available talents, so his career took off also.

His early context emphasised the importance of understanding both the reality of the people and the context. As a brigade commander, he ensured that he and his men, at all levels, were tested in a series of problems: “We did this every six weeks for three years, two and a half years, and by the end of it we were all in each other’s minds, we worked over problems”.

His sense of direct action remained key: “I always had a saying, if you want to get a good headquarters going, a good company going, give it a problem to solve”.

G3

Did not see anything in his childhood that linked with later learning experiences and did not indicate any willingness to explore it.

G4

G4 was also reluctant to link a narrative between childhood context and his later leadership however he did say: “I think boarding school from eight with parents often abroad so holidays with relatives or staying at school and lots of games would

qualify as a contextual challenge. I was not a good student and never rose in the prefectorial ranks but I did box for my public school”.

When I pressed him on whether he was known by or had any confidence in any particular characteristic when he was a child he replied: “I do not think I was sufficiently self-interested, as in examination of self, to even consider the possibility. I was, I reflect, keen to do things rather than to be something”.

While I sensed that further probing would be considered invasive I picked up three aspects that he mentioned as being significant – that resonated with me as a child of the colonies with similar experiences:

He often spent his holidays with relatives or at school

He was keen to do rather than be something

He boxed for his public school

Spending significant time, and especially recreational time with relatives or relative strangers, inevitably demands skill in developing diverse relationships.

This child had to manage relationships with his relatives and school staff during holidays when he was, in a sense, ‘beholden’. Unless he was to lose his self-respect entirely he needed to ensure those relationships were skilfully managed so that he fitted in appropriately.

In the boarding school, he was kept fully occupied (as I too recall) with “lots of games”. The accent was on doing rather than being or even *reflecting* on being. And what better way to ensure that he was not vulnerable in this ‘doing’ culture than by taking up boxing? As A1 said to me, on his own decision to take up boxing at school: “I did it to be respected by my peers – my significant others, my mates. That was very important to me – to be respected by my significant others. And I found I was good [at boxing] so the message to bullies was to leave me alone”.

In summary, G4 set the template for dealing with the world by learning how to explore, develop and manage effective and diverse relationships between and within diverse contexts.

G4 wrote in his reflection on the themes: “Leadership is a relationship and it is the relationships as much as one’s ability to manage them that you are laying down, and the more experience of establishing these relationships the quicker the new ones can be built. It is these relationships that allow some of your themes to be exercised particularly in a large organisation”.

G4 went on to explore these inter-relationships across a number of contexts: studying and developing military theory while experiencing the changing nature of war in Northern Ireland, Africa Iraq, Bosnia to name a few. At an individual level, I asked him why he did not respond to his being blown up in Northern Ireland by thinking “the enemy was a total bastard that needs to be wiped out” and instead recognised that he needed to be engaged as a sentient being. His reply was a clear expression of his acute understanding of the contextual nature of relationships without being captive to either: “These are not alternatives – he was a sentient murderous bastard – the important thing to learn or realise was he was sentient and would react to your actions to his perceived advantage”.

At a macro level he was able to explore, develop and apply his understanding of the relational contexts of war while following an extraordinary career in the field.

All those research participants who were prepared to explore their early contextual challenges for this research saw those challenges as formative in their learning approaches. Even G4, who felt he did not have specific characteristics as a child that affected his later life wrote to me: “In short, while successful challenge negotiation early in life may develop character it may not develop the aptitude to lead”.

It is *not* argued here that these challenge negotiations directly develop ‘the aptitude to lead’. What the data appear to show is that the *way* these leaders managed their early contexts created a template or platform based on which they navigated their later lives. A1 dealt with the ‘mistake’ the school authorities made by the way he ensured that he was perceived as a child in the Caribbean: as the son of a successful and respected man who did the best possible – even if it meant leaving the island. In turn, the way he dealt with the mistake (challenging himself to do the best possible until the possible was no longer the best) pushed him to take the even greater decision to retake his examinations and develop his career in education. A2 dealt with her challenge of being an ‘unvalued girl’ by *creating* value for the family by being rational, consistent and responsible. She continued to practise these attributes throughout her life. C1 – despite the fact that his parents shared few or no frames of reference with him – cleared his own path to a career that was beyond his parents’ and even his own familiarity. That ‘pioneering’ work set the pattern for working in the hitherto unknown underground in the mines and for introducing the innovative concepts in his company. C2 actively managed herself through part of her context (by gaining respect at school as a leader and gaining technical knowledge to get out) but passively accepted the ‘shame’ that her

mother felt. It could be argued that G2 and G4 did not actively manage – or navigate through – their contextual challenges. However, it is clear that both were developing modes of navigation that were fully revealed when they found a ‘home’ that appreciated them. G2 developed an acute sense of reality of his context and what needed to be done. G4 navigated through his years at boarding school and absence from his parents by honing his skills at managing diverse relationships in diverse contexts. They both said that they *realised* they were good at certain things by the time they were in the army. My argument, generated from their data, is that they were good at these things because they had been dealing with them for some time.

In conclusion, therefore, the innate confidence characteristic is unlikely to be innate. What these leaders have displayed is that they have actively dealt with contextual challenges at an early age by adopting a particular stance or relationship to their world. Having found this stance (the *navigational stance*) relatively manageable they re-enforced it with a template or pattern for future dealings. This *navigation template*¹ (as it will be called from now on in this work) would therefore have been finessed, adapted and practised for a considerable period by the time they approached leadership positions. Hence, the confidence these leaders displayed in ‘seeing a way through’ – after all, they had been navigating their way through situations since they were children. What is not part of this research but would be a valuable focus for further research is whether the degree of *active* management of childhood challenges is stronger among successful top leaders than it is among other individuals.

2. Strongly pragmatic

The mean score on this characteristic was 4.9 with all but one rating their identification with 5. G1 scored it 3 and commented: “Yes, I totally agree but one must also have vision”. I suspect that this may have been as a result of the fact that he misinterpreted pragmatism as not involving aspiration.

¹ I have thought very carefully about the use of the word template. It is not ideal because it does not reflect, amongst other things, the ability to dial up or down characteristics as required. Alternatives considered included dashboard, console, mould, outline, and framework. None is satisfactory. I will continue searching. The term template as used here is closely aligned to the medical definition of Merriam-Webster.com “a gauge, pattern or mold used as a guide to the form of a piece being made”. This is a *guide* –not a fixed chart.

This characteristic, derived from the research participants' data, describes the ability to do the best that is possible until it is clear that the possible is not best any more – and then to strive for more. Chief executive C1 encapsulated this 'pragmatism with vision' with the words: "I will take what I can when I can get it in pursuit of the aspirational goal. Because after a year, the aspirational goal may be irrelevant".

This ability to do what is possible – rather than to wait for the ideal circumstance or even walk away – appeared to be a very strong theme for these leaders. A2, remarked: "That's very much me. I like the way you describe it, 'if the best isn't possible, do the best possible.'" A3: "That's me. Always have a plan B". CEO C3 went so far as to say that "Perfectionists can't be good leaders. You do what you can". Pragmatism (together with holism and 'navigation') achieved the highest mean scores.

Pragmatism – certainly as described here – appears to also have a strong link with the first theme, in which the leaders as children discovered their skills (as G2 put it, "I started to recognise I was good at some things") and even constructed their identities (C3: "I became a combination of being extremely nice and extremely tough") by *doing*: by actively managing their contextual challenges. The argument proposed here is that these leaders understood the value of doing the best possible because they had been doing it for a long time. As discussed earlier, even those research participants, such as G2 and G4, who had seen their childhood as essentially passive had, in reality, been 'doing'. This pragmatism is reflected in the ethos that G4 experienced in the military. He says of his regiment that the senior officers "encouraged by example, and in fact, their junior officers to get out and try it; go and do it and see".

3. Three-Way Challenge

The mean score in this category was 4.55, lowered by four scores of 4 and 1 score of 4.5. All the participants strongly supported the capacity to challenge self and others and to enable others to challenge them. However, not all were comfortable with the idea that they facilitated others to challenge them. A1 was an exception. To him, "Challenges equal oxygen" both during his time as Head of the school and before. Not only did he challenge himself by turning himself into a champion boxer while he was still classified a 'thicky' but, soon after qualifying as a teacher, he made no less than 50 applications for deputy head posts before he was accepted.

A2 gives herself 5 for challenging herself and others but worries that she does not get as much challenge from others as she needs. So she gave herself 4 for the latter.

A3 challenges herself with her workload and feels she makes it easy for others to challenge her.

C1, like A2 worried that perhaps he put up barriers to be challenged. "Do I give others enough opportunity to challenge me"? And, "If they don't is it because of my position, is it because of personal barriers that I put up? Do I value challenge from others? Yes. Do I like it? Not necessarily. Do I thump myself over the head and remind myself that it's good for me? Yes".

C2, while giving herself 4 for the same reason, commented that, "most leaders" she had come across would never allow themselves to be challenged. C3, in line with her early stance as debater and negotiator, makes sure that someone plays devil's advocate if her staff agrees with her unanimously. The generals all subscribed to the importance of the 3-way challenge and seemed to take it as read that they would be challenged by their staff. G2, as discussed earlier, set up a structure to ensure that he was regularly challenged by his subordinates in exercises where his own skills were openly tested.

4. Absence of isolation and unilateralism

On reflection and after discussion with the research participants, the characteristics of this theme could have been more elegantly and precisely expressed. Regarding 'isolationism' I wrote to G4: "I wasn't very clear here. By seeking social support, I meant, 'did you seek advice and did you, through your ability to establish relationships, have a range of allies?' This is not about being clubbable; this is the ability to develop allies, supporters and a network to do the job". Similarly, with 'unilateralism' the point was not that these leaders never made decisions on their own but that they sought other points of view and even challenges before they made them.

Both aspects of this theme converge on the awareness of these leaders of being 'in relationship' with the world; even when they could see what the 'right' decision should be (as G2 'saw' when he was with the MoD), they realised that the interpretation and application of such decisions were social acts, developed in relationship with other human beings.

The mean rating here was 4.5 with no score lower than 4. General G1 argued that at times he had to take decisions in the face of resistance from colleagues. However, the very fact that he knew that those decisions were being resisted meant that he had entered into some discussion before taking them. There was, in short, neither isolation nor unilateralism.

C3 flatly commented: "I never take decisions by myself. Never". C1, in his characteristically reflective way, admitted to having a tendency to "go it alone" if he doesn't see the value of consulting. However, he continues, "The trouble is I know that I can be very surprised by people whose opinion I may not have valued". This resonates with A1's comment that "sometimes I had to take decisions unilaterally", particularly where he felt others did not have the breadth of perspective he had in regard to a particular issue. However, he made sure that he had a circle of allies and challengers who learned from each other.

While it was correct to say that these leaders did not isolate themselves, it was equally important to specify that they consciously broadened their own perceptions in relationship with their fellow beings. Even if, like C1 or A1, they resolved *not* to seek advice from particular individuals for specific decisions or strategies, they did so in the context of a relationship with those individuals. In simple terms, the only way they could know that 'A' was not going to be a valuable source of advice (or that seeking advice would set up risky expectations) was through a relationship with 'A'. The more accurate description of this characteristic is, on reflection: *acute awareness of the social nature of decision-making. This is changed accordingly in the final themes below.*

5. No internalisation of failure

The mean score here was 4.7 but the mode – the most frequently appearing score – was 5. Eight of the ten leaders rated their identification with, and practise of, this characteristic with a 5. Even C2, who gave herself a 3, said that although it sometimes took a long time, she was always able to move on. It appears this is a singularly pragmatic skill: the ability to 'walk away' and not to adopt the failure. A3 said categorically: "I always go for plan B".

C1 was the other leader to rate his practice as below perfect because he berates himself for failing – but only briefly. Then he too "moves on after a day or so". Similarly, G3, while insisting leaders need to take responsibility sees it as equally important they put failure behind them. CEO, C3, unhesitatingly admitted she was "so forgiving when I mess up".

This ability to move on, to 'put failure behind' appears to be linked both to the pragmatism that so strongly characterises these leaders as well as to the ingredients of 'resilience', briefly discussed below. It could be argued it also has a resonance with the next theme 'no blame' (not attaching blame to others).

6. No blame

This was another theme where the wording left room for misinterpretation but fortunately was clarified in the final dialogue with the research participants. It is another example of why this research relied so heavily on dialogue and on relatively frequent referrals to the respondents. Language usage, especially when describing behaviour, is both contextual and individually particular. Blame, to many of these leaders simply meant ensuring that people take responsibility for the failure of an assignment. Probably because of my practice as a coach, I used the word in a more emotional and even shame-inflicting way as in attacking the morality of the person for the failure of their practice. While both their original interviews and final conversations showed little indication of the element of 'shaming', what was clearly missed, as an attribute, was their almost stern adherence to holding people accountable.

Despite clarifying the definition in conversation, this theme achieved the weakest identification among the leaders, at a mean score of 4.05. However, it was bi-modal (both 3 and 5) and perhaps indicated the range of interpretation and application.

My notes from my conversation with A1 show the following reaction from A1: "People need to be held accountable".

[SB: by blame I mean did you dump on others rather than critique?]

It depends. What went wrong? If it was the individual you need to know why they went wrong. Otherwise, was it systemic, a one-off or behaviour? Then if you can fix it, ok. If you can help them to learn and fix it, ok. Otherwise you may need to get rid of them.

In line with his own 'navigation template', A1's priority is to find out what went wrong and fix it – even if it means firing the culprit. Despite there being little or no sign of the shaming element, he scored himself 3.5.

A2 also tries to divorce the person from the task but my notes from the conversation with her show that she worries that she may not be entirely successful.

I like to think I don't. And I honestly don't. My attitude is 'let's try and fix it'. However, I realised the other day when talking to a colleague that they thought I was blaming them – and I had to go and explain that I wasn't.

C1's response in the final conversation strongly indicates this dichotomy between the pragmatic focus on repairing the situation and the emotional tendency to blame. He scored himself a 4.

My default position is 'let's fix it'. But also 'it's someone else's fault'.

Probably because of my engineering background, I try to understand what went wrong in detail to prevent it happening again. In the mines it was a case of 'shit happens. We have to fix it because other people will die'.

G1, scoring himself a 5, was probably the clearest in divorcing the person *from the task*: "Don't blame the person; criticise the action. I was always clear about mistakes made and how to be made better".

His fellow General G3 makes no apology about holding people accountable.

"When something goes clearly wrong and the task has been properly delegated – in other words it is not the direct responsibility of the leader – then you cannot condone it".

What the final conversations indicated was not that they don't blame but that they avoid shaming. This characteristic holds much in common with 'no internalisation of failure' in that it balances responsibility and accountability (that of self or other) with 'fixing it' and 'moving on'. It is interesting that C3's 'forgiving' approach to herself is reflected in her attitude to blaming others. She said in her conversation with me: "I never blame. The problem is I tend to surround myself with a diverse bunch of overachievers who beat themselves up. If I started blaming them I'd put them into a downward spiral".

On reflection this theme should be combined with 'no internalisation of failure' and formulated as: *No attachment to failure: but hold self and others accountable.*

7. (Acute sense of) Reality

On first identifying the characteristics, there was some initial concern over whether 'reality' was almost identical to 'holism: the ecosystem'. It is clear from these final

reflections that it is not. 'Reality' is dealing with (navigating) the world as it is, rather than how one thinks it *should* be. It is being acutely aware of what is present in the room and working with it. Holism is being acutely aware of the linkages, the interdependencies *between* rooms that go to make up the entire house. The leaders seemed to have little trouble in establishing the difference and strongly identified with it. The mean score was 4.8 with only two scoring below 5, at 4.

A1 sees this characteristic as being attuned both to the nuanced detail and to the tolerances of the system.

I'm always conscious of what's in the corners, not just in the middle of the floor. And I'm really grounded. I know what the system can take and what it can't. Sometimes if the system has gone through too much, you may need to just tread water.

A3 aligns herself strongly with: "'Reality' as in knowing what you're dealing with; no wishful thinking. That's called being Jewish!"

C2, who rated her identification as 5, called it "an intense sense of what is rather than should be as a basis".

This was in line with G3's perception: "We have to live in the world as we find it".

Both C3 and G1 identified with this realistic focus on the present but both felt that it needed to be accompanied by 'a vision'.

There is no contradiction between being acutely aware of the present and developing a vision for the future. After all, the future emerges from the present. This concept is close to that of Scharmer's (2007) 'presencing', which allow the future vision to emerge from an intense way of critically assessing the present as theatre, text and performance.

8. Holism

This theme, together with 'pragmatism' and 'the navigator' shares the highest median rating of 4.9. Only one leader (C2) scored their identification lower than a 5. They all clearly recognised this theme both as a concept and in their own application of it, as their remarks in the final conversation illustrate.

Holism, as discussed earlier, is agreed by the research participants as an ability to understand and manage both the linkages and interdependencies within the ecosystem, as well as the ecosystem itself. G3 sees it as an imperative for senior

leaders: "The more senior a leader you are the more you have to take into account the political, economic and commercial ramifications and which pocket you fit into". G4, while not commenting on it in his final communication, is one of the military's strongest proponents of understanding and managing the relationships between text and context. One understands the text by its context. As G4 noted during his original interview, BP treated the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 as an engineering problem. They saw the text as an engineering fault but did not realise that the context was entirely different. If they had realised that the context was a socio-political problem (at the very least) they would have handled the entire issue with more sensitive, detailed communication and community-supporting initiatives *as well* as effective engineering solutions.

C3: called it "seeing the connections". Her decision in not opting for a simple majority of the board to authorise the changes she wanted to make in her organisation, is an example of grasping the context, seeing the connections, understanding the ecosystem. The changes were not just structural but historical and emotional, striking at the loyalty base of the local branches on which the organisation was founded. If she had seen the context simply as one of structural change, or even cost improvements, she might have uprooted the foundations of the body.

C2 saw all the linkages but felt frustrated that she was not able to work with the entire chain.

G1 presents a similar perspective to that of G3 and G4. Like G3 he says "the higher the rank, the more holistic you must be". Like them he focuses on understanding the context. As a historical example, G1 refers to the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, (as detailed by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust) when 400 Dutch peacekeepers failed to prevent the slaughter of 8,000 Bosnian Muslims by members of the so-called Army of Republika Srpska. The Dutch may have thought they were following orders by not intervening but they forgot the context of why they were there: to keep people safe.

A1 not only understood the ecosystem within which he was transforming a poorly performing school but he used it to *help* in that transformation. He understood that he needed to include the parents and community in his strategy, and that he needed to ensure alliances at a national level to raise the profile of the school. In a sense the poorly performing school became a symbol for poorly performing urban education, which now became a problem of government and politicians.

9. Alert to constituents

This theme was intended to describe alertness to the mood, emotions and concerns of people at all levels around them. The word 'constituents' was used to denote all members of the organisation rather than only voting members. Although some leaders questioned its usage, all were able to work with its definition. The mean score was 4.65; the lowest score was 3.5 and the mode, 5.

A2 knew it was "critical to be alert to the mood in a place" but felt she didn't "walk the corridors" as much as she could. A3 had always had reliable sources of mood and it was the first asset she missed when she arrived in her current leadership position. She is also keenly aware that the people who most often seek to communicate with her are not necessarily those who, to paraphrase A1, are sitting in the centre of the room. She set about finding out who were the voices of the non-mainstream in her organisation.

C1 did not comment on this theme but in his original interview spoke of making sure he used the 'hot-desk' system his organisation practises to try and mix with as diverse a selection of his employees as possible. However, he admits that after the company reached a certain size, the direct approach simply is not possible. He tries to listen to his organisation through trusted representatives or (as he put it) a "random sample selection". It appears it is an issue of which he is intensely aware, and he constantly tries to refine through, among other things, the "operating design" of the company, its physical layout and his own personal efforts.

G1 understood the importance of this theme but worried that the changing nature of the German armed forces, as it transformed itself from conscription to a professional force, meant that he did not share a common set of values with younger officers who were more concerned about money than duty. In a fairly telling remark he said: "I didn't change; life changed".

G3 did not subscribe to the term 'constituents'. He said if I was talking about 'situational awareness', which included the morale of his men, then he was on board. I suspect G3's term was closer to the 'reality' theme whereas this theme focused much more on morale, mood, and emotions. Of course, if 'alertness to the situation' is thoroughly exercised it would certainly include awareness of human emotion. However, it would not necessarily focus on it specifically.

G4 was, it seems, very alert to the constituents but sometimes chose to ignore elements of them. He wrote in his final reflection: "While I was alert to both the

context and the text of the endeavour I was often unaware, sometimes deliberately, of the institutional context (internal politics) but then if I had paid attention to that perhaps I would not have done what I did". This is a tangible example of how these themes work in a compound mode: 'dialling down' one theme (alertness to constituents) to ensure the success of at least two others (holism and navigation).

10. Navigator/Negotiator

The leader as navigator was a theme with which the research participants clearly and strongly identified. The mean score was 4.9 with the lowest individual rating being 4. In the submission to the leaders for their comment and reflection, both terms were used, as a compound noun, in an effort to capture both the aspect of 'the non-captive insider' and the ability to "find a way through" (as A1 said of himself). The word 'negotiator' initially seemed to be the more assertive. However, it was not entirely appropriate in that it could also reflect an 'outside agent' (brought in to negotiate) rather than someone 'finding a way through', for and with the organisation. As discussed earlier a number of the leaders preferred the term navigator, with one participant offering the insight that navigation is strategic whereas negotiation is one of the tactics the navigator employs.

A1 strongly identified with the theme of navigator:

It's finding your way through that. It's finding different channels to get through to your destination, reflecting on your belief system, your assumptions, even your direction. Sometimes you tack to get to your destination – and you may find yourself at 90 degrees to where you want to get.

A2 agreed: "I really like this. The navigator steers the ship".

A3 thought the term navigator was not only more appropriate than negotiator but she disagreed with my perception that the negotiator reflected the assertiveness of the leader more closely.

C1 saw navigation in the light of 'seeing a way through' – expressing fluidity of the adroit leader actively managing the direction. "I always see a way through. Or at least I always try to find a way through".

C2 was the only leader who opted for the 'negotiator' in the compound noun, confessing that she was extremely adept at negotiating on behalf of her

organisation but not so good for herself. However, as navigator she did see herself as a problem solver in the face of significant challenges.

C3 not only found strong identification with this but implicitly understood the relationship between navigator and negotiator: "This one particularly resonated. I am constantly course correcting. And that phrase 'balancing dilemmas' is wonderful. Take the risk and then fix it. The key is deciding which ones you can course correct and which not. It's a series of negotiations".

G1: also implied the tactical nature of negotiator as against the strategic navigator by reflecting that it takes a combination of art and science to simultaneously "deal with normal daily situations as well as the big things". However, he argues that the nature of military leadership is essentially different from that of the corporate or academic sectors. "The difference between the military leader, that you don't have as a commercial leader, is the ethical responsibility for people's lives". It appears his argument is that the military leader needs to ensure that the strategic value of an order is balanced by its moral impact more than in the other sectors. While I agree that the life and death nature of military leadership in war does make the ethical and strategic dilemma both immediate and dramatic, it is one with which all the leaders in this research have been concerned. The fact that an academic leader's unethical act – for example – may not have mortal consequences, neither makes that act any more ethical nor reduces the ethical obligation of the leader in question.

G2: It was G2 who explicitly proposed the relationship between navigation and negotiation: "Navigation is strategic. Negotiation is tactical. One of the tools of navigation is negotiation".

G3's response to the theme of navigator articulated the leader as tactician and strategist. "Did you know that warfare is the selection and maintenance of an end? And leadership is ends, ways and means. You're talking here of the same thing".

G4 confirmed his strong identification with this theme but did not provide further detail. However, both his definition of leadership as a relationship and his argument that strategy must be developed and applied according to the context within which it is required strongly implies a leader's job is skilfully navigating the channels that are these relationships with individuals, interests and contexts.

In summary, this theme will be identified as navigator – with negotiation being one of its tools. It would appear these research participants see the navigator as a clear identifier of the leader and of themselves as leaders. It is also argued that there is

a strong link between the assertive setting of the so-called *navigational stance* during childhood, the early start in practising the *navigation template* and leaders' current confidence in seeing a way through – in being adept and adroit navigators.

11. Direction (not specific targets)

This theme produced firm resistance from one general (G3) who pointed out that warfare can be about specific targets. Despite this, the mean score was relatively high at 4.6. Two leaders rated their identification at 3 while the remaining eight scored themselves 5. The mode for this category therefore remains at 5.

This theme, too, benefited from a dialogue to ensure clarity, although it patently did not convince G3. It was explained to the research participants that this concept of 'direction' does not preclude these leaders from aiming for a specific target, be that taking Goose Green during the Falklands War or raising \$200 million for a university development programme. However, the theme that emerged from this research was that these leaders did not lock themselves into specific targets. Victory at Goose Green may have been part of the overall target of reclaiming the Falkland Islands, which, in turn, was in the context of ensuring 'the space' for a number of political aims. A specific target was part of the 'weaponry' to achieve a direction.

G3 told me he "saw my point" but disagreed on specific occasions. He felt that even the "longer term purpose" of the Falklands War was specific: the restoration of British sovereignty to the Islands.

Although G1 also scored his own practice at a relatively low 3 for this theme, he clearly understood the concept within this theme: "Direction results from the holistic long-term perspective – the overall mission – which must be your yardstick for your tactical decisions".

Following on that logic, the more senior the leader, the wider is the perspective on the overall mission, the sharper the understanding of the tactical decisions. In G2's terms (discussed earlier) the political aims of the Falklands War was the 'strategy' to be navigated; the Battle of Goose Green was the tactic to be negotiated.

A1 captured this sense of navigating the strategy when he told me in his final reflection: "For [the school] I knew we needed to be judged 'outstanding' because that meant a certain standard for teaching, pupils, parental engagement, culture, ethos. But the detail of how we would get there changed on the journey".

The other two academics aligned themselves with this sentiment, with A3 adding that she regarded this theme as excluding ideology and dogma.

CEO C1 referred me to his reaction to the pragmatism theme. In essence, he would take what he could get on the way to the aspirational goal – because that goal might be entirely irrelevant in a year. Seemingly contradictory, this position actually reflects a shrewd commitment to ‘direction’ without being held captive by the goal. After all, moving towards an aspirational goal sets a direction. The opportunities that come one’s way on that journey are more than likely to be ‘in the right direction’. Therefore grasping them would seem to be entirely sensible. What is *not* sensible is insisting on reaching that goal even if the goal were no longer sensible, possible or even relevant to the direction of the organisation.

C2 felt this theme was probably one of the ‘most true’ for her; as did C3 who remarked: “Sometimes I just know I just want to make it better every day”.

In summary, this theme is about setting and navigating the right direction while understanding that targets are negotiation points along the way.

12. Mentors

This theme involves key relationships with individuals who challenge *and* support leaders along the way.

This final theme was characterised by unanimously strong identification and resonance but had two low scores. A2, who scored herself 2 – the lowest rating in the entire study – typifies this stance with her comment:

“I know that this is crucial but I have had far fewer effective mentors than I should have”. She reflected that perhaps she did not seek mentors because of her concern of being regarded as a ‘girl who needs help’.

C1 scored himself 3 saying that while he recognised their importance – and has had one or two people who supported and challenged him, “I have mostly gone my own way”. However, he did add that his wife has been his strongest mentor, as challenger and supporter.

It is particularly interesting to this researcher that both A2 and C1 set their childhood navigation template in a context where neither could rely on common

frames of reference with their families. They both set out to be heard in ways that were almost entirely alien to their parents, to 'go their own way'.

The military leaders not only emphasised the crucial nature of mentors but celebrated the institutional facilitation of mentor relationships. G1 also brought out an additional and very relevant aspect to this theme: that future leaders need to *seek* out mentors and to recognise when they are required.

All the other participants worked with significant mentors, and all emphasised their dual value. As A3 put it, "I needed the pat on the back mentors but I also needed those who would challenge strongly".

What happened to resilience?

Only one of the leaders asked whether resilience should be added to the common themes that emerged from this research. As a coach, I am a strong advocate of my clients' developing the ability to, as the New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998) defines it, "withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions". So it was with some surprise that I realised it was not present. However, on reflection, it is clear that resilience is not a skill in itself. It is the *result* of a number of practices, of which not internalising failure is particularly significant. As Cyrulnik (2003) put it in the conclusion to his almost poetic research work on resilience, "The most damaging blows aren't always the most spectacular ones. And the way we picture the blow in our internal world is a co-production of the private story the injured person tells himself and the account given by his culture" (p.168). One of those 'co-productions' is failure. As A1 sees it, failure is "a tool for future work". In another, failure becomes the protagonist's identity: "I am a failure". These top leaders learn to focus on strongly shaping the co-production itself rather than editing the film after completion: whether by not internalising failure, seeking to broaden their own perspective, challenging and being challenged, supporting and being supported or developing an acute perspective of the ecosystem they inhabit. The discussion earlier on the navigation template proposed that these leaders appeared to manage their childhood challenges particularly actively. In other words, they learned to actively co-produce their lives at an early age.

6.3. Conclusion

The ten research participants revealed extraordinary learning experiences. As behoves individuals of such depth of experience, they all described incidents or events at various stages of their lives that could be described as pivotal or 'disorienting dilemmas' as Mezirow (2000) termed them. My early suspicion (if not assumption) was that these pivotal incidents played a major role in shaping their learning. However, what became evident during the identification of common themes was that many of these incidents occurred when the research participants were adults. The way they dealt with these events showed that they brought as much (if not more) learning to the episodes than they took from them. In fact, the way they each managed the incident was at least as telling as the event itself. The question then arose, how did they *learn* to navigate these events in such a way? Where did learning to deal with major challenges such as this originate? The ensuing dialogue with the research participants in turn led to the finding that these leaders had developed a 'navigation template', a framework for dealing with their relationship with the world, which they practised and refined continuously and which remained with them throughout their lives. This template was originally identified as having 12 characteristics but, as indicated above, was then reduced to 11 in response to the research participants. As Appendix 11 shows, all these leaders strongly identified with the characteristics at a remarkably consistent high level, which seemed to indicate that either the leaders strongly practised this behaviour or tools or were convinced that it would be beneficial if they did so more consistently, or both. What is more, the template of characteristics was seen as composite in nature. All the characteristics were present all the time but were brought to the foreground – 'dialled up' – when required.

If this template was developed and maintained to 'deal with the world', the next question was what does this say about the *way* the leaders wished to manage that world? What does the template say about the perception the leaders have of themselves in the world – and therefore of how they want to manage that relationship on an ongoing basis?

The template of characteristics (that these leaders identify strongly with and practise) appears to be designed to make them:

1. Alert to their world

Acutely aware of what is their world, what is going on in it

2. Act in the world

Take initiatives in the world; make 'one's space' in the world

3. Act with the world

Work with the world; 'ally' with the world

It is a template, which enables its user to be in partnership with the world. The world is manageable. It is not a place where 'things are done *to*' but rather where things are done *with*. This is not an attempt to say that successful leaders are innately democratic. They do 'things with' in the mode of navigators who know they cannot get from point A to B without understanding both the channels, weather, shipping lanes and navigational options, as well as the capabilities of the crew, the speed, depth and manoeuvrability of the boat.

These leaders work with a set of characteristics that enable them to be in 'a manageable partnership with the world'. What we also know from the data is that they seem to have developed this template from early on in their childhood. What can we therefore begin to infer? That these successful top leaders:

In their childhood exploration of new experiences tried out tools and characteristics, which enabled them to experience their (limited) world as manageable as long as they were alert, pragmatic and able to work with it.

Because of their early effectiveness, they continued to use this template, refining and developing its characteristics throughout their lives.

Because this template provides a greater degree of choice in finding solutions, and therefore greater possibilities of success, top leaders amass significant reserves of confidence in their abilities to 'find a way through'. Conversely, because they have learned from an early age to manage and negotiate with 'immutable' challenges as a normal part of their lives, they minimise a sense of personal failure.

This, in turn, enables the following theory in progress:

Successful top leaders experience their learning through a 'navigational stance', which they develop early in life and which assumes a manageable co-productive

partnership with their world. They go on to experientially develop a composite 'navigation template', which, if consistently applied, enables them to maximise the effectiveness and sustainability of that partnership.

The next chapter will expand on both the explicit and implicit propositions of this theory and provide a brief illustration with research participant data. It will then go on to relate specific elements of the theory to existing literature before discussing its application, limitations and value.

7. Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

The research question at the heart of this dissertation is:

What are the personal experiences of learning of individual leaders who have achieved significant influence and overall authority in their chosen institution or organisation - and what implications do these personal experiences of learning hold for coach-mentoring at this level?

The sub-questions to the core enquiry are:

- How do leaders in authority, subjectively and privately, express their experience of learning?
- What do they identify as key or significant learning in their lives?
- What in their perception helped trigger significant learning from these events?
- What types of learning do they perceive they brought to the job versus what they learned 'on the job'?
- What organisational learning inhibitors have they encountered and how do they deal with them?
- How do they see the nature and impact of their authority on their learning (subjectively, from within)?
- Do these same leaders feel their experiences can be used to inform the coaching of new leaders?

My own initial stance, probably an assumption, was that leaders experience significant learning through what Mezirow (2000) called "disorienting dilemmas". It is implicit in the second and third sub-questions above. However, to ensure that the impact of this and other possible assumptions were minimised, a process of referral to, and verification by, the research participants was structured at each major stage of the analysis through:

- Verification of the transcript
- Verification the individual themes
- Reflection with me on the common themes
- Reflection with me on the early propositions within the emerging theory

After the last reflective conversation with the research participants, the final 12 themes common across the sample were amended to form the basis for the constructed theory (see Table 11 below). They were reduced to 11 by the integration of internalised failure and externalised blame. 'Innate characteristics' was removed and replaced with 'composite navigation template'. Finally they were re-ordered to more clearly reflect the 'flow' of the template.

As discussed earlier, A1, G3 and even C1 specifically talked about accountability – their own as well as that of their reports. Others, while avoiding the pejorative aspects of 'blame' clearly looked for hard headed understanding of causes. What it amounted to was a lack of attachment to failure (both their own and that of others) while maintaining accountability. Hence the integration of no attachment to failure and blame.

As regards 'innate characteristics', in their reflective conversations the research participant pointed to learned experiences rather than traits they were born with. Even A2 who had talked about her childhood cockiness almost as being innate, referred (in her later reflective comments) to her behaviour as being learned from wanting to be valued in a society where girls were not valued. Hence 'innate characteristics' was replaced with the learned 'navigation template'.

Themes for participants'' reflection	Themes post-reflection
1. 'Innate' characteristics	1. Navigation (10)
2. Strongly pragmatic	2. Pragmatism: do the best possible (2)
3. 3-way challenge	3. 3-way challenge (3)
4. Absence of isolation and unilateralism	4. Socialised decision-making (4)
5. No internalisation of failure	5. No attachment to failure but hold self and others accountable (5 & 6)

6. No blame	6. Reality (no wishful thinking) (7)
7. Reality	7. Holism (see all the linkages)(8)
8. Holistic	8. Alertness to constituents (9)
9. Alert to constituents	9. Direction (not dogma or fixed target) (11)
10. Negotiator/navigator	10. Mentors (12)
11. Direction (rather than specific target)	11. Composite navigation template (new)
12. Mentors	

Table 11: Themes pre and post RP final reflections (Numbers in brackets indicate previous theme positions)

From these final 'post-reflection' themes emerged the developing theory articulated earlier:

Successful top leaders experience their learning through a 'navigational stance' which they develop early in life and which assumes a manageable co-productive partnership with their world. They go on to experientially develop a composite 'navigation template', which, if consistently applied, enables them to maximise the effectiveness and sustainability of that partnership.

7.2. Discussion and resonance with the literature

7.2.1. Implications made explicit

This section attempts to expand on this developing theory. It articulates and discusses the five main propositions that underpin the theory both in terms of the context of existing literature and the data itself.

The timing and placing of the literature review in grounded theory research is the subject of continuing debate. Glaser (1978) even suggested that the analysis should precede the review. Charmaz (2010), as admirably pragmatic as ever, clearly recognises that one cannot remain theoretically agnostic and that one must at least be able to evaluate and compare existing theoretical frameworks in the field.

I elected to review existing literature on learning and leadership before the analysis and – as this discussion shows – have been able to locate these findings within that literature. However, as intimated earlier, analysis of the data took me into areas that I did not expect and which required me to extend my review of existing theories in for example the works of Piaget (1977), Kegan (1982) and Bowlby (1988). This is not in an attempt to justify the emerging theory but to further inform it.

There are five propositions that arise from this narrative.

1. These successful top leaders, through early experiences in childhood, develop a 'navigational stance', which assumes that there is a manageable partnership between them and their world.
2. These leaders go on to develop, apply and hone a 'navigation template' of at least 11 composite tools and characteristics, which maintains and extends the 'partnership' relationship with their world.
3. These leaders do not assume they dominate or control their world. Leadership is a platform from which to do rather than a station to hold.
4. These leaders are in default transformative mode.
5. These leaders are primed to manage pivotal events or disorienting dilemmas relatively effectively, through years of accumulated experience of applying the appropriate tools to extend their partnership with the world.

1. These successful top leaders, through early experiences in childhood, develop a 'navigational stance', which assumes that there is a manageable partnership between them and their world.

The navigational stance is the space the child creates in its early and initial engagements with its world. This personal, created space revolves around how the child experiences the balance of power between itself and the world thus far and therefore its capacity to navigate its way through the world.

For example, A1 developed his navigational stance in the Caribbean – before he arrived in Britain. He was surrounded by a supportive social structure that not only respected his family but also regarded his absent father as someone who could not

be constrained by the island in his bid to make things better for his wife and sons. His father – in a precursor of A's own attitude – did the best possible on the island until the possibilities the island offered were no longer the best. It was in this context that A1's stance of seeing the world as a manageable partnership was rooted.

Nelson Mandela's early upbringing was in some ways similar. He too was born in a supportive community. Not only in a tight community where, "we used to gather round community elders to listen to their wealth of wisdom and experience" (Mandela 2010, p. 52) but also as a member of the royal Thembu household (p.750). Mandela was certainly "born special", contrary to Daloz's rather sloppy assertion that he was not (Daloz, 2000, p. 103). He was very special in his community and, in his own words, "was being groomed for the position of chieftaincy" (Mandela 2010, p. 31). As Daloz goes on to describe, Mandela's early years gave him "a sense of both trust and power" (p. 107). That sense of trust and power, I argue, was the stance he adopted in his relationship with the world – and was the one he took with him into the long endurance contest for the liberation of his country.

All the research participants in this research study experienced the world as a 'manageable' place. C2 may have been subjected to the victimhood she indicated her mother felt, but she also knew that her technical skills and curiosity could help her escape *from* that world if not entirely deal *with* it.

G2's description of what he called his "orientating position" (derived from sailing) is particularly relevant to the navigation stance. In our final reflective conversation, he said that it needed to say two things:

1. I want to do it
2. I can do it.

Neither the stance nor the template tries to explain personality, traits or detailed behaviour patterns. The stance is not innate; it is learned as a result of early experience.

Of course, the navigational stance as outlined here is not entirely novel as a concept and bears similarities to Luxmoore's "organising statement" (2011, p. 1119), which distils one's entire autobiography into one statement, such as 'Nobody notices me' or 'I am a star'. The difference is that whereas the 'organising statement' declares, 'This is who I am, distinct from the world', the navigational statement says, 'This is the room I have to act in and with the world'. The former is

a declaration of ego and identity. The latter is one of relationship and relative power.

The navigational stance can even be accommodated within Damasio's (2010) "three stages of self", which describes moving from the primordial organism to the individual, conscious of its holistic relationship with the world (p.181).

It could be argued that the navigational stance also bears similarities to the "life scripts" of transactional analysis (Berne, 1972). In his last work, Berne defined life scripts as an "ongoing program, developed in early childhood under parental influence, which directs the individual's behavior in the most important aspects of his life" (p.462). At first glance this is similar to the navigational stance. However, when he goes on to make clear that he regards a 'programme' as a plan or schedule to be followed, the crucial difference becomes apparent. The 'script' is a mind-set that determines the child's present and future engagement with the world. The stance is a specific experiential perception the child forms of the nature of its relationship to, and balance of power with, its world.

Similarly, the nature or continuity of bonding relationships in childhood –as elaborated by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) may result in the child feeling it is in a manageable relationship with the world, but not necessarily so. Obama's self-described relationship (2007) with his "primary attachment figure" (his mother) (Bowlby, 2004, p.29) was disrupted for a number of years, as was that with his other powerful attachment figures (his grandparents) but he clearly feels he can do 'business with the world'. However as Lewis, Amini and Lannon (2001) clearly articulate, there is an undoubted link between coherent attachment figures in early childhood and the ability to 'read the world' (See proposition 2 for further discussion on limbic regulation).

However, at its core the navigational stance, unlike the other concepts, is the position we take to act in our relationship with our world, whether as antagonists, partners, competitors, negotiators, victors or victims.

Kegan (1982), in common with Piaget (1977), traces the development of the child from being initially unable to differentiate between itself and the world to creating meaning from its *relationship* to the world. Each development stage, which Kegan calls an "evolutionary truce" (p. 571), sets the balance between self and its world. Kegan (1982) repeatedly characterises each evolutionary truce in terms of power and balance. He asks, "to what extent does the organism differentiate itself from (and so relate itself to) the world?" (p. 847). He describes it particularly graphically

as the dynamic tension “of being swallowed up and taken over; and the fear of being totally separate, of being utterly alone” (p. 1909). He goes on to argue that he believes the human experience of this power relationship “may be our experience of the unitary, restless, creative motion of life itself” (p. 1909). Within these terms, what this current research argues is that children who go on to become successful top leaders develop an assumption that their relationship with the world is in manageable balance. Although that relationship may tilt one way or another throughout life, the leader is underpinned by a fundamental assumption that she will neither drown nor be left high and dry.

Piaget’s core concept of “*equilibration majorante* (progressing equilibration)” (1977) whereby children progress developmentally by continuously balancing their assumptions with the information received from the world certainly does not contradict the first proposition here and may share some of the characteristics of the navigation template in the second proposition. Piaget (1977) sees equilibration majorante as a search for equilibrium or stability. In contrast this developing theory proposes that humans seek to find effective ways of *dealing* with the world, based on their assumed *relationship* with the world developed as children.

It seems to me that Piaget’s (1977) concept of equilibrium forms the basis for the concept of the ‘disorienting dilemma’ or ‘disjuncture’ as characterised by Mezirow (2000), Jarvis (2006) and Illeris (2007b) among others as a catalyst for learning. After all, if we assume homeostasis or stability is the norm, then new learning will almost inevitably occur when disruption occurs to that assumed norm (see further propositions for a more detailed discussion).

In using the word ‘power’ as a characteristic of the stance, one runs the risk of assessing the navigational stance predominantly in terms of ‘power over’. As Faltinger (2011) argues when discussing Foucault, if “power is ubiquitous” then it makes the discourse and the players subject to the “effects of power” (p. 119). It is specifically not my intention to argue that the leaders in this study assume themselves to be ‘more powerful’ than their world in taking up this stance. This would be to assume a competitive if not an antipathetic relationship with their world, whereas I am arguing precisely the opposite. They simply reach a conclusion, through early experience, that they are in a *partnering, co-productive relationship with their world that is manageable*. As Margaret Thatcher (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 1984) once said of Mikhail Gorbachev, “We can do business together.”

The writers reviewed earlier on experiential learning do not specifically explore a 'navigational stance' but this first proposition appears to be implicit in much of their work. If, as Jarvis (2006) says, "At the heart of all learning is not merely what is learned but what the learner is becoming" (p.5), then 'becoming from what and to what'? Spinelli uses the term "noesis" (2005, pp. 16–17) to describe a consciousness extremely close to the navigational stance outlined above. The difference is that the navigational stance specifically proposes that the 'how' of interpretation is derived from the child's conclusions about its relationship to, and manageability of, its world.

The navigational stance is, for this writer, the logical application of the phenomenological approach to experiential learning. What is hopefully novel in this research is the proposition that successful top leaders develop a navigational stance that enables them to co-operate and co-construct with the world rather than 'doing to' or 'being done to' by the world.

2. These top leaders go on to develop, apply and hone a navigation template of at least 11 composite tools and characteristics, which maintains and extends the 'partnership' relationship with their world.

The research participants identified strongly with the characteristics of the navigation template. Even where they felt they did not practise them enough, such as C1 or A2, they did – in the words of C1, "recognise the importance of them".

The 11 characteristics of the Navigation template appear to enable these leaders to maximise their ability to be alert to, act in, and partner with, their world. As a composite template, the tools are always present. Each is moved closer to the foreground or background as required. They are also what can be described as multi-referential. Holism, for example, is a requirement for establishing one's context but also needs to be present when trying to plot a way through (navigation), as well as when being 'alert to one's constituents' as well as when doing the 'best possible if the best is not possible' (pragmatism). All of the characteristics are present in each other as well as across the template.

In essence this template is a set of tools that, with consistent use, enables these leaders to be acutely alert to both the content and context they are dealing with, to maximise the options of navigating through that ecosystem and to optimise the alliances and resources to do so successfully. Small wonder that CEO C1 said in his final reflection: "There is a continuous time residual aspect to all these tools. They

continue to shape you long after you think they have faded. They are always there together in the strengths or intensity that you need them”.

A1's comment on the tools, which, after all, he has used for many years, is remarkably similar: “These are not just individual characteristics and tools. They are always present – with different weighting according to the circumstances”.

It is a particular concern that the 11 tools could easily be mistaken for ‘traits’ or innate characteristics. Proposition 2 suggests that the tools are experientially learned and practised by these leaders to support and maximise the impact of their relationship with their world – their navigational stance. What is not part of this research but could well be a useful topic for further research is whether individuals who develop a less manageable, and therefore less effective, stance also develop a re-enforcing template or whether they try to adjust. For example an individual who develops a navigational stance that sees itself as ‘antagonistic’ to the world may develop a navigational template that *cloaks* that antagonism rather than reinforces it. In this data these leaders not only appear to develop and apply a supportive template but, on reflection as adults, also recognise that they have done so.

The template can be regarded as ‘too good to be true’, i.e. that it is so (currently) desirable in Western leadership thinking that anyone who denies having one would be regarded as a ‘poor leader’. However, the strength of identification and application, and the debate that these themes engendered among the research participants would seem to belie that suggestion.

It is important to emphasise that the tools do not necessarily result in unmitigated success or similar behaviour among all the leaders. They are all filtered by differing navigational stances. In her interview A2, with a navigational stance of being rational, responsible and reliable, told me she was particularly puzzled that on two occasions senior members of her staff had not acted rationally to maximise their interests. “I guess that’s what I under-estimate in people: the emotion involved in people’s reaction. Because [...] stormed away and wrote blistering emails which made her look ridiculous, and kind of insured she never again had the kind of position she wants: a senior administrative position”.

A2 may well have ‘been alert to her constituents’ but she was constrained by that filter of ‘rationality, responsibility and reliability’. Similarly, G2’s navigational stance involved self-reflection and self-reliance, an acute sense of reality, cutting his losses and moving on. Despite this he fell into the trap of not ‘socialising his decision-making’ when he was seconded to the Ministry of Defence. We can infer

from the data that this was because his sense of reality was initially developed from self-reflection rather than social participation. His service in the army did not challenge that sense; decision-making may have been socialised, but not necessarily decision *taking*. Certainly not when it was, as G2 phrased it in his interview, “such a blinding statement of the obvious”. Unlike the army, the MoD represented a number of diverse interests that needed to be persuaded. This required him to bring ‘holism’ and ‘socialised decision-making’ (among others) to the foreground of his template. Instead, as G2 said, not without humour, “One by one the right decisions were overturned because people hadn’t been forewarned of them. Boy, did I learn a lesson”.

The ‘reality’ and ‘holism’ that G2 had applied in the army, were different to the orientations that he needed to apply in the MoD. However, it was this very same navigational stance, supported by the well-honed tools of the template, which enabled him to ‘not internalise his failure’, to ‘quickly see the linkages’, to understand the value of ‘socialised decisions’ and finally to cut his losses: *to learn lessons quickly*. As G2 said in his interview: “Okay if this is ‘the rules of the game’ we will be in the master class”.

The navigation template is clearly a multiplex framework for experiential learning. As such it may be useful to position it within Kolb’s (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) six propositions underpinning his experiential learning theory (ELT), particularly as Kolb and Kolb tell us it is drawn from the most notable of experiential scholars including “John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Paolo Freire, Carl Rogers and others” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.194).

Kolb’s propositions are simply headlined in Table 12 below and taken from Kolb and Kolb (2005, p. 194). Fuller summaries can be found in the literature review chapter earlier in this work.

Kolb’s proposition headlines	The navigation template
<p><i>Proposition 1:</i> Learning is best conceived as a process not in terms of outcomes.</p>	<p>As discussed above, the navigation template, as a composite set of tools, is a continuous process in which outcomes – including failures –become part of the continuing reconstruction of learning.</p>

<p><i>Proposition 2:</i></p> <p>All learning is relearning.</p>	<p>The navigation template developed by these leaders has a number of built in mechanisms (including three-way challenges, alertness to reality, the use of mentors) that optimise both the continuing critical assessment, review and modification of learning.</p>
<p><i>Proposition 3:</i></p> <p>Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.</p>	<p>For Kolb, learning is triggered by dissonance and conflict. This is particularly interesting in the context of this theory. If the leaders are consistently trying to maintain equity in their learning-with-the-world, then do they learn because of dissonance or because of “curiosity” (G4) or “wanting to do it better”? (C3) Disagreement may well trigger some of the learning but self-challenge to find a ‘better way through’ may do so as well. This last example does not require dissonance. After all the current way may be perfectly acceptable to all. It is, in this case, the leader’s drive to co-create that is the learning driver here, not dissonance.</p>
<p><i>Proposition 4:</i></p> <p>Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.</p>	<p>These leaders use the navigation template for a holistic adaptation <i>with</i> the world. They certainly applied (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) “the total person – thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving” (p.194) but this was as a co-construction with the world – not merely as an adaptation to it. As Damasio (2010) expressed it, “The entire environment offered to the brain is perpetually modified, spontaneously or under the control of our activities” (p.67). We change the world as much as it changes us.</p>
<p><i>Proposition 5:</i></p> <p>Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.</p>	<p>There is no contradiction here, it would seem. Kolb and Kolb (2005) link this to Piaget’s “equilibration” (p.194). In the case of leaders with authority we would simply add the drive to co-construct the learning.</p>
<p><i>Proposition 6:</i></p>	<p>Kolb (2005) articulated this as a counter to the transmission model of knowledge. The ‘logic’ of the</p>

Social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner.	navigation template is that – with ideal usage – there is a continuous flow of knowledge between personal and social domains.
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Table 12: Connecting Kolb's ELT and the navigational template

The navigation template is in accord with Kolb's propositions and adds a dimension to it that is specific to this level of leader: the application of tools and characteristics to consolidate a co-constructing relationship with the world.

Mezirow very specifically tells us that a crucial mode of making meaning is "becoming critically aware" (2000, p. 4) of the assumptions and expectations that we have in making interpretations. His work on transformational learning has become significantly influential in the field of learning and he has enabled its enrichment by debating with numerous and often fierce critics over the years. As a theory on adult learning, transformative learning says very little about the child. It assumes that "meaning perspectives are often acquired uncritically in the course of childhood" (Taylor, 2000, p. 288) while, in contrast, the experience of adults is framed 'coherently'. The interpretation of "meaning perspectives" has shifted over the years but seems to have settled into the 'worldview' that individuals hold as a result of significant childhood "experiences with teachers, parents and mentors" (Taylor, 2000, p. 288). Transformation theorists assert that it is only in adulthood that these experiences can be coherently structured, critically reviewed and transformed.

Little research has been conducted by transformation theorists into the child's meaning systems. It is perhaps for this reason that 'uncritical' seems to have become synonymous with 'passive absorption'. It may be true that children do not critically evaluate early experiences but as Lewis, Amini and Lannon (2001) tell us, they do not simply absorb passively. Very young children are hard-wired, via limbic regulation and resonance to constantly gauge emotions, threat, power and leverage. It is through limbic regulation that children develop their relationship with, and therefore their capacity to act within their world. This is in keeping with Bowlby's attachment theory (1988) where much of the interaction and gauging of the world is conducted in interaction with the child's attachment figures.

The proposition that meaning perspectives are acquired in childhood and then reviewed and structured in the developing adult does not contradict either the concept of the navigational stance or the navigation template. Indeed Taylor's

(2000) "meaning perspective" and Taylor and Cranton's frames of reference" (2012, p. 82) as well as the other models of transformational learning could be conceptually linked to both the stance and the template. Brookfield (2000), in his critique of transformative learning, clearly places the influence of power at the heart of adult education (p.137) but, presumably because of its lack of research on children, says nothing about the power perspectives between the child and its world. However, as he acknowledges, "In Foucault's words 'it seems to me that power is 'always already there,' that one is never 'outside' it" (Foucault, 1980, cited in Brookfield, 2000, p.136), then that power is 'already there' when the child is exploring its world. Even if one is not able to critically evaluate relative power, surely understanding it is crucial for the survival of all mammals, including human children.

3. These leaders do not assume they dominate or control their world.

Leadership is a platform from which to do rather than a station to hold.

The implication here is that the leaders in this research appear to see leadership as a 'job' rather than a rank or achievement in itself.

It originates, I would argue, from the stance that the essence of being-in-the-world takes in ensuring a co-productive relationship with that world. Activity – what I have called navigation – and partnership are at the heart of that relationship. Stasis and inequality are its enemy.

Even A1 who applied close to 50 times before he was appointed Deputy Head of a school (no mean achievement in itself as a young black teacher in 1970's Britain) did so because: "I realised that my influence as a classroom teacher was great with 30 kids, but if I was further up the food chain, my impact would be that much greater so I wanted at a very early age to be in charge".

Not only did he want to be 'in charge', he wanted, he says later, "to capture an organisation". Why? Because he wanted to 'do'. He wanted to share. He wanted to build.

C1 admitted that being appointed CEO was "something that you - that you have been hoping for". His excitement for the job was focused on the relationships and the building:

I think that the earliest period was both the excitement of it being a huge opportunity to be able to share things in the way that I had wanted to and

had thought about for a long time and at the same time, realising that there is absolutely more to it than just being able to set a direction. (C1)

Not even setting a strategic direction was enough; he needed to do, to share, to build.

G2 and G4 both saw being leaders as *doing* the job. G2 said in his last reflective conversation: "After I became a captain I found that I may not have been physically the toughest but I could really do the business".

G4 is both one of the most brilliant thinkers on the nature of war as well as hugely experienced in the *activity* of war. His interview for this research is a narrative of the continuous dynamic between trying to apply his vision, doing what needed to be done in the meantime and developing the relationships to do both.

All of these leaders saw their leadership as a platform for experience – for experiential learning. They learned from the job, they did not impose themselves on it or try to control it.

Despite admitting that he was not "clubbable", G4 is quite explicit about the essential nature of relationships in leadership. As he wrote in his reflective commentary on the final themes:

Leadership is a relationship and it is the relationships as much as one's ability to manage them that you are laying down, and the more experience of establishing these relationships the quicker new ones can be built. It is these relationships that allow some of your themes to be exercised particularly in a large organisation. Always remembering that fame has no present and popularity no future, what and how you did with whom in the past doesn't half get you a long way. In short, while successful challenge negotiation early in life may develop character it may not develop the aptitude to lead. I think that aptitude develops when others follow, copy or approve of the negotiator/navigator finding the way over, though or round the challenge. (G4)

Leadership, or even the "aptitude to lead", is according to G4 a spiral of relationships and successful experience. There is no hint of status and domination in his approach.

The priority it would seem for these leaders is to 'navigate through' with as many options as possible. In order to do that they need to be fully alert to their context, namely, the world(s) in which they are operating. Trying to dominate, or even the

assumption of domination, blunts that alertness. If I try to control you, by definition, I will reduce both the extent and co-operation of your performance. We become, at best, competitors and at worst, opponents. Energy is then diverted to managing and defending against that antagonism rather than getting things done. These leaders understand – and have experienced from a very young age – that an inimical relationship with the world is simply wasteful. A1 expressed little or no animosity that he was only appointed Deputy Head on his fiftieth application: “I was inclined to think mainly when they had made a wrong decision, when they made a decision not to appoint me that was a wrong decision so I didn’t internalise the failure. It’s a system”.

A2 tells the story of having successfully transformed an institution at some considerable personal pain, only for her boss to refuse to endorse her succession when the boss moved on. She certainly was hurt but she moved on. She even managed to learn key lessons from her erstwhile president: be consultative, take risks but maintain deniability, and if “somebody gives you two options, look for a third”.

Perhaps, in summary, these leaders understand at a fundamental level what Collin et al (2011) discovered in their research in a Finnish hospital. Hierarchical or institutional power is disrupted by the simple fact that so-called seniors will inevitably (and probably regularly) require knowledge, information or skills from more junior staff. In order to access that support they will need to ensure that those relationships are as open and un-inimical as possible.

4. *These leaders are in default transformative mode.*

The driving logic of this proposition is based on the following proposals:

- These leaders have developed a navigation template for their own learning.
- This template consists of at least 11 characteristics with which these leaders have indicated significant strength of identification and/or usage.
- If the characteristics of the navigation template can be shown to enable transformative learning then it may be inferred:
 - That consistent application of the navigation template will enable a default transformative stance
 - The strength with which the leaders identify with the navigation template indicates that even if there is a lapse of consistency in some characteristics they still perceive the template as normative. It is their default model.

In testing this proposition, it would be sensible to reconfirm the definition of 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 2000; Brookfield, 2012), identify the principal characteristics that enable transformative learning and then compare them with the 11 characteristics of the navigation template.

Mezirow (2000) sees transformative learning as a process in which, "taken-for-granted frames of reference" are changed into opinions and tenets that are more appropriate for action – through the development of, among other characteristics, inclusivity, transparency and reflectiveness (pp. 7–8). This requires a deep and constant alertness to the relationship between individual and social domains and of how, in this interplay, we "come to our knowledge".

How do the 11 composite characteristics of the navigation template –apply to the characteristics of transformative learning? (The characteristic of the pivotal incident or the disorienting dilemma will be dealt with under the next proposition.)

1. *The navigator*

This is the foundational characteristic of these leaders and a key element of the template. The navigator's task and approach is to 'find a way through'. In order to do so, she cannot simply rely on the 'chart' – even if she is following the same route time and time again. She needs to be alert to obstacles that may appear, terrains that change, more effective channels of passage that are discovered – and of course the changing nature of the vehicle being navigated. She needs to ensure that her communications and relationship with other crewmembers is such that they will understand and execute her guidance and route plotting.

A1 in his final reflection for this research describes 'navigation' in very similar terms to those characteristics we have identified for transformative learning: "It's finding different channels to get through to your destination; reflecting on your belief system, your assumptions, even your direction. Sometimes you tack to get to your destination – and you may find yourself at 90 degrees to where you want to get".

C1 also echoes this aspect of getting through. In his final reflection conversation he said: "I always see a way through. Or at least I always try to find a way through".

C3 in her reflection commented: "This one particularly resonated. I am constantly course correcting. And that phrase 'balancing dilemmas' is wonderful. Take the risk and then fix it. The key is deciding which ones you can course correct and which not. It's a series of negotiations".

It seems clear that that this navigation template characteristic on its own utilises and requires at least Mezirow's characteristics for transformative learning discussed previously. If the navigator does not take responsibility for and test what she has learned, she will find that, in a changing world, what was once a clear route is now a blocked channel.

Similarly if the navigator is not aware of the assumptions and multiplex influences of and between contexts, she increases the chances of taking inappropriate actions. Disorienting dilemmas may not be required all the time: the navigator may decide to follow a new route because it is more scenic. However, disorientation or confusion is an extremely frequent companion of the navigator. 'What's going on? This channel is completely blocked. Last time I sailed a barge through it!' or 'What did I do differently that made me lose my way this time round'?

2. Pragmatism

Do the best possible until the possible is not best. This could not be found as an explicit characteristic of transformational learning. However, the purpose of all TL (or more accurately of all learning) is to act more effectively and appropriately in the world. One would anticipate that exposing oneself to those TL characteristics including challenge, planning and skill building, all for the purpose of acting, would increase the possibility of those resultant actions being 'the best possible'. What this characteristic, is intended to add are two key dimensions:

- a. The requirement that all actions, including all those on the 'voyage to the transformation', are the 'best possible'. A1 did not save up his best for when he became a head teacher. He did the best possible as a boxer even when he was being labelled a 'thicky'.
- b. The requirement that all challenges, discourses and experiments are grounded within the reality of the possible. There are no idle dreamers among our leaders. C2's route out of poverty was not built on fantasy but on diligent efforts and technical skills.

3. Three-way challenge

This transparent openness to challenge – as discourse, as testing one's own concepts and assumptions, and even as testing one's adaptability within new contexts – is a constant theme of both this characteristic and those of TL. The navigation template sets up a structure that facilitates a consistently challenging mode.

4. *Socialised decision-making*

“Socialising the file”, as G2 put it, certainly enables the exposure of current thought, purpose and direction to the inclusive discourse identified with TL. Here one can also see how the cross-referential nature of the navigational template, can stimulate other characteristics of TL. Socialised decision-making enables the opportunity for three-way challenge which, in turn, enables the uncovering of assumptions and frames of reference. Finally, the sequence of socialised decision-making, three-way challenge and uncovering assumptions ensures *preparedness* for action. ‘You say we need to expand our business by exporting to Sri Lanka. And it sounds strategically sound. However, do we have the manufacturing capacity and local distribution knowledge and skills?’ The answer to that question then enables another TL characteristic : planning and building.

5. *No attachment to failure but hold self and others accountable*

If one is to take responsibility for applying one’s learning, values and meaning with integrity then surely there is a reciprocal obligation to enable others to do so as well. Holding someone accountable or, equally important, enabling others to hold *themselves* accountable can be a valuable gift, if it is done without the distortion of emotional blame. When the senior civil servant gently told G2 that it was “*sometimes helpful to discuss files before signing them off*”, he was enabling G2 to hold himself responsible. The shareholder of a company I managed said to me, “When I point out the poor behaviour of one of your executive directors I want to know what is it about *you* that makes him think he can behave like that”? (private conversation, 2001). That question enabled me to hold myself accountable. Both in effect said, ‘If you do X, Y will follow. Take responsibility’. Neither added the burden of emotional blame. Had they done so, one suspects, it would have given G2 and me the option to *react* emotionally and defensively rather than fix the problem. Holding oneself and others accountable, with no attachment, enables TL in additional ways: modelling the willingness to question frames of reference, to raise awareness of contextual norms and challenges, to listen attentively to mentors and to skilfully plan and execute appropriate actions.

6. *Reality (no wishful thinking)*

This sense of (C2) “*what is rather than should be*” of knowing (A1) “*what the system can take*”, flows through the entire navigation template as well as TL. It is present in holding oneself accountable. It is certainly directly relevant to the transparency and honesty demanded in TL by the uncovering of assumptions,

reflexivity and the acute awareness of differing contexts. All reality may be filtered by our perceptions of the world but both TL and the NT ask that we test those filters, whether by reflection, challenge, discourse or supportive relationships. Without this forensic view of ourselves-in-the-world (and not just the world *or* ourselves) it would be extremely difficult to effectively uncover the assumptions we hold of ourselves-in-the-world.

The other dimension to this characteristic of the navigation template is its incentive to “act on one’s evolving commitments” (Daloz, 2000, p. 117). In order to understand the realities of the ground, C1 and his colleagues went through repeated exercises of scenario planning to maximise the effectiveness of their actions. When G1 talked to his subordinates about directives he had issued from HQ it was to understand (the reality of) their effectiveness in action. G4, when developing his theory of warfare, stated that he had been applying elements of it as it developed. As Daloz (2000) put it, “to test and ground one’s growing convictions in action, is vital”. (p. 117)

7. *Holism*

This is patently part of TL’s characteristic of being aware of the assumptions and mind-sets contained within and about contexts (Mezirow, 2000, p.24) but there is an additional point to be made here. If TL’s aim is to enable transformative action then one of the necessary ingredients must be an acute understanding of the context(s) within which the action takes place. Certainly the ‘mind-sets within and about’ these contexts are vital, but equally so are the linkages *between* contexts. Knowing that “Slaves [in Asia] are forced to work for no pay for years at a time under threat of extreme violence” (Hodal, Kelly and Lawrence, 2014) to supply fishmeal to shrimp farms in Thailand, is shocking enough. However, it may not transform my thinking and therefore my actions if I do not know that these shrimp farms supply major British, European and American retailers. And if I do a little research and reflection I may ask myself whether such organisations flourish because of the developed world’s demand for huge quantities of very cheap food. In this instance, it is the linkages between contexts that enable the transformative action rather than simply the awareness of the mind-sets. Context is important to learning not just, as Taylor puts it (2000) “in relationship to difference” (p. 310) but in its relationship to globality. How will what I learn change if I expand the context within which I am operating? Is the *extent* of operational context, after all, not one of the assumptions that need to be uncovered to enable TL?

8. *Alertness to constituents*

This would certainly seem to be reflected in TL's characteristic of awareness of "supportive relationships and a supportive environment" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 25). In the template it is being attuned to the mood, thinking and 'temperature' of the community that ensures there is reciprocity of trust. Without it there is little hope of mutually supportive relationships.

9. Direction (not dogma or fixed target)

This is not a specific characteristic of TL but has a direct bearing on it. Both dogma and fixed targets tend, in my experience, to reduce emotional flexibility to view "The Presence of the Other" (Daloz, 2000, p.112), the alternative way of being. When promoting a fixed belief or achieving a fixed target is my primary aim, I am going to find it very difficult to release or even reflect sufficiently to consider an alternative. It was the understanding by both generals G3 and G4 of the direction (rather than the targets) of the war in Northern Ireland that provided them with their TL rather than personally traumatic incidents. (See proposition 5 for further discussion). G3 certainly felt that there were specific targets to be achieved such as the taking of a city or even the "restoration of British sovereignty to the Falkland Islands". However, the taking of a city in battle, and even being injured in that battle, may be, in terms expressed by G4, the 'text' rather than the 'context'.

It's surprisingly difficult, I find, to get people to grasp this point, but you will never operate successfully as a strategist unless you understand the context. And, indeed, successful strategists frequently change the context rather than the text and thereby cause the text to be understood differently.
(G4)

If the context of the war in Northern Ireland was to hold the ring while a political solution was found then although certain texts (for example, blocking weapons supply) may have been fixed, it would have been disastrous to attach a specific aim or dogma to the context.

10. Mentors

Daloz (2000) specifically encourages the deployment of a mentoring community to enable transformative learning, particularly to the "common good" (p.116). The leaders in this research have told us that they benefited from the advice, challenge and support of mentors, some of whom continued to play that role into their current leadership.

11. Composite Navigation Template

As a composite, ongoing model the navigation template cannot help but enable those characteristics that facilitate TL on a continuing basis. In addition it has certain qualities – such as holism, pragmatism and navigation– that may well establish a pattern of continuously broadening one’s horizons. For these leaders the navigation template is also based on a frame of reference which itself promotes TL. The foundational assumption of the navigational stance of these top leaders is that the world and the being are in a manageable workable relationship, the very balance of which means that the being can continuously ‘become’ and can continuously transform.

It is not argued here that all these leaders are in constant transformative motion, any more than that they always apply all the template characteristics. However, one can infer from the responses of these research participants that they strongly identify with them as either something they practise consistently or they aspire to do so. They regard the template therefore as normative – as their default position. Therefore it can be inferred that these leaders are in default TL.

This leads to the final proposition in support of this developing theory.

5. These leaders are primed to manage pivotal events or disorienting dilemmas relatively effectively through years of accumulated experience of applying the appropriate tools to extend their partnership with the world.

As discussed earlier in the literature review, Mezirow (2000), Jarvis (2006), Illeris (2007b) and Kolb (1988, 2005) argue that pivotal incidents, dissonance or, as Jarvis (2006) prefers, “disjunctures” (p.6) are key learning catalysers. All these writers link their arguments to equilibrium. Illeris (2007b) links learning to the drive to restore “our *mental and bodily* balance”. Jarvis (2006) in fairly similar vein talks about disjunctures occurring when “our biological repertoire” (p.16) cannot cope with a situation ‘unthinkingly’.

What is proposed in this research is that these leaders do not undergo TL principally from disorienting dilemmas. While they all went through very significant and sometimes traumatic pivotal episodes, there is evidence that these leaders were primed to manage those dilemmas effectively given their navigational stance and navigation template.

Many of these leaders underwent very significant challenges that could certainly be described as disorienting dilemmas. A1 faced at least three so-called disorienting dilemmas: when the British school authorities mistook him for his older brother,

when he did miserably in his O level exams and the 50 applications it took to be appointed as a deputy head teacher. As detailed elsewhere, he dealt with all these episodes with extraordinary pragmatism and resilience. This characteristic of 'doing the best possible until the possible was no longer best' was already a developing characteristic of his stance before he arrived in London at the age of seven, and was reinforced by the (Dewey 1938) "continuity" of his navigation template over the next seven to eight years. He would not have been able to deal with either of those challenges as resiliently if he had not at least developed his leader's stance and template beforehand.

A2 underwent extremely traumatic personal experiences as a young woman. She dealt with them with the rationality that she had developed as part of her navigational stance – enforced by years of application and identification with her navigation stance.

G4 comes closest to describing a pivotal incident as transformational (being badly injured by an IRA bomb) when he says, "So there was another experience, which made me stop treating my opponent, or be very careful not to treat an opponent, as an item". But his very next sentence clearly indicates that this was not transformational: "That was an important experience but it's not – it fits in with the general flow of things". This was another in a series of learning episodes. The way he managed each of these episodes, minor and major, defined the way he managed his reaction to being blown up.

G2 revealed only in his final reflexive conversation the traumatising event on Mont Blanc. When I asked him why he did not 'freeze' into inaction like the others in the party he said, "I'm creative and I could see what was happening". Notice, he did *not* say 'it made me creative and drove me to see what was happening'. He acquired those characteristics long before the accident on Mont Blanc.

It is not within the scope of this research to establish whether any beings principally learn from disorienting dilemmas. However, what we can say is that the data does not reveal that *these* leaders did so.

Daloz (2000), in his "Common Fire" study of "one hundred socially responsible people (Daloz et al. 1996) found "no instance of transformation as the result of an isolated, epochal event" (p.106). In fact, the researchers found that for these participants – chosen for their long-term commitment 'to the common good' – "change or shift was long in coming and its possibility prepared for in myriad ways, generally across years" (p.106). I agree with Daloz's implication that TL may well

have occurred incrementally and cumulatively. What is questionable is the value of Daloz's assertion that this learning would have occurred with innumerable, unremembered "disorienting dilemmas" (p.106). That seems to be both redefining disorienting dilemmas and equating them with transformational learning. As discussed earlier, Mezirow (2000; 2009), Brookfield (2012) and Jarvis (2006) all see these events in dramatic and even threatening terms that trigger "self-examination of fear, anger, guilt or shame" (Mezirow, 2000, p.22). These are major events that are not likely to be 'unremembered' in a production line of events. They are clearly meant to indicate a jarring, surprising discovery of a gap and an 'unbalancing'. Otherwise, how do they deliver change in the "form", as Taylor (2000) puts it, that TL entails? Daloz cannot justifiably argue that these dilemmas incrementally triggered TL especially if they are 'unremembered'. What he can (and very movingly does) argue is that his socially responsible adults incrementally underwent deep change through (2000) "time, strategic care, patience, the conviction that we are not working alone and the faith that there is something in the universe, as Robert Frost said, 'that doesn't love a wall'" (p.121).

The leaders in this study certainly do 'not love a wall'. In fact, what I am arguing is that they have been able to forge a navigational stance that believes they can – one or way or another – breach, get round, undermine or scale most, if not all, walls. Their default position is not to seek equilibrium but to push the boundaries. They do so, as we have seen, not as solitary figures but in partnership with the world, seeking and providing the alliances, challenges, discourses, mentors, critical awareness and commitment to the 'best possible' that their navigation template teaches them. Perhaps the issue lies with the way disorienting dilemmas have been characterised as major, discombobulating events. These leaders do not learn principally from that kind of disorienting dilemma. They learn from constantly *orienting* themselves to find new and better ways to navigate their world.

7.3. Conclusions

A particularly strong conclusion from this developing theory is that this sample of senior and successful leaders emerged through consistent hard work. While they may have had the early advantage of having discovered they can 'do this', they learn to 'to do this *successfully*' by continuous application. This research study consistently demonstrates the practice of the navigation template whether in discovering new contexts (A1, G4), innovating and reforming (C1, C3, A1, A2, A3), maximising engagement and the development of people around them (G1, C2, G3).

If the Beatles played their repertoire for 10,000 hours before they became successful (Gladwell, 2008) we can only imagine how many hours leaders need to apply *their* template to be and remain successful.

Unlike other templates, the leader's navigation template is designed for transformation and for continuous learning. So leaders of this calibre learn less by so-called major disorienting dilemmas than by the drive to navigate their world as effectively as possible. As navigators, they learn that they have no choice but to work *with* the world, not against it and not even in competition with it.

The research question for this study required focus on at least three learning contexts:

What are the personal experiences of learning of individual leaders who have achieved significant influence and overall authority in their chosen institution or organisation – and what implications do these personal experiences of learning hold for coach-mentoring at this level?

Personal: How did these leaders experience, make meaning and develop their personal learning?

Organisational: How was that learning brought to bear on the organisations or institutions that they led?

Power: If power is "always already there" (Foucault, 1980 cited in Brookfield 2000, p.136) and these leaders exercise significant quotients of it, what is their learning within the context of power and authority?

In response, the developing theory that is being proposed here is:

Successful top leaders experience their learning through a navigational stance that they develop early in life and which assumes a manageable co-productive partnership with their world. They go on to experientially develop a composite navigation template, which, if consistently applied, enables them to maximise the effectiveness and sustainability of that partnership.

We have already detailed the sources and narrative of the theory and its propositions. What may be useful is to draw together some concluding remarks on the implications of this theory on those three contexts.

Personal

Although it may be argued that the navigational stance was elicited from what the research participants said about their experiences, with one exception they all saw the way they managed interactions in their early life as continuing to leave its mark on their behaviour as leaders. Even if they did not identify it specifically as the 'navigational stance' they did characterise it as such.

For these leaders the world is a partner 'they can do business with'. Early testing of their world may have produced loneliness, loss or even misery at times but it showed that they could navigate through it. It is an extraordinarily relationship that they have been able to establish with their world: they are not against it, or even with it. They are part of it; literally: in '*part*-nership'. That produces a logic along the following lines: 'if I am in partnership with the world, then – with the world – I can find a solution to the problem or find a new and better way. Both the problem and the solution are part of the indissoluble me-in-the-world'. Therefore their learning – as we have seen – is experienced as ultimately a social experience. They may reflect on their own but that reflection is derived from a social experience and tested and applied socially. They do not, it would seem, distract themselves by worrying what the world thinks of them, as one would do if one viewed the world as inimical, competitive or even separate. Similarly, the *world* does not put obstacles in their way. Obstacles *are* in the world and they can be avoided or removed.

As detailed earlier, all of these leaders identified strongly with the navigational template and used the compound characteristics in their daily private and professional lives. The self-confidence that starts in the stance's 'I can do this' and flows to the (applied) template's 'I have done it many times' must be considerable. It certainly provides the platform for leading considerable organisations and institutions successfully.

Organisational

How do the stance and template, respectively adopted and practised by these leaders, have an impact on their effectiveness as organisational or institutional leaders? Since these leaders are regarded as successful by most standards, what can we infer about the role the template has played in this success?

One of the questions early in this study addressed the question of how leaders maintained transparency in their organisations, knowing 'what was going on below them'. A key aspect of the leaders' navigation template is its focus on socialising decision-making and, (as a logical corollary), being alert to constituents. Working with people to develop solutions and decisions is, in my experience as manager and

coach, a particularly effective way of understanding their level of engagement, their morale, their motivation and, of course their skills. G2 described in his interview how he made sure he ensured that his juniors tested him and his senior officers regularly. This was not only because he wanted to be challenged but because, as he put it, "I had to gain their confidence and also had to allow them to flower under my command". Would that one heard those words more often from a corporate CEO let alone a soldier.

The other question that was posed earlier was how institutional leaders could ensure they maintained a reasonable balance between innovation and stability – between consistent operations and supply (on the one hand) and the innovation of strategy, product, delivery and strategy, on the other? The navigation template is underpinned by the dynamic tension between the 'navigator' and the pragmatic *'doer of the best possible, until the possible is not best anymore'*. Application of these tools means that these leaders will develop the most effective text within the context until the context becomes inhibiting. Then they will change the context. A1 is a clear example of this. He developed the behaviours and education levels within the school until he saw that in order to sustain them he needed to expand the context to the homes of his parents as well as the local community. In his final reflective conversation he encapsulated his leader's acute sensitivity to this balance: "I'm really grounded. I know what the system can take and what it can't. Sometimes if the system has gone through too much, you may need to just tread water".

Similarly, C3 understood very clearly that innovation in her organisation (necessary as she deemed it to be) could not be attempted until the 'system', or rather the ecosystem, could take it.

Groupthink (Janis, 1973) was another issue that was discussed earlier. An issue not only faced by institutional and organisational leaders but politicians as well. The navigational template, if applied consistently, with its built in challenges, would surely militate against insularity. None of these leaders has demonstrated insularity without triggering their own 'challenge' characteristic.

Power

There is no doubt that these leaders understand power – both as potential and actual force, but not superiority. C1 talked about having to balance the interests of his paymaster shareholders with those of the other stakeholders in his organisation. G4 spoke of the resistance to his proposed reforms; C2 was confronted by the

power of people with common histories and frames of reference. A2 came up against the power of the medical profession to abort her baby. However, their default position, according to the data, appears to have been 'I can manage this'. They practise what the operating theatre staff at that Finnish hospital experienced (Collin et al, 2011): power and leverage rarely flow in one direction only. If power is a fact in their manageable world (much as are obstacles, opportunities or threats) then it is simply another interaction to be navigated or negotiated. Hence A1's response, even as a child, to the overwhelming power of the school authorities and G2's reaction to the destructive power of the avalanche on Mont Blanc.

7. 3.1. Reflections, reflexivity and limitations

In the prologue to this work, I said about the journey I made back into South Africa with my wife and my child, "If I had trusted the terrain and my previous learning I would have saved us all the fear and the rage that accompanied not knowing". I might as well have said: "If I had been a successful leader." That is precisely what this study has shown: successful leaders trust the terrain and their learning. They trust it because they are part of it. They learn that the terrain contains surprises that may jump up and bite them – and they inevitably will at some stage – but that is what 'terrains' are made of: bomb blasts, rock falls and cancer. They also contain joy, new ideas, successful campaigns and good health. For the successful leader they are all to be navigated, managed, and dealt with holistically. For these leaders 'holistic' means more than just the 'whole person', bringing emotions, senses, the brain and the mind to the table. They bring the whole person in the whole person's world to that table. They fully understand that they do not think, act, and dream anywhere but as part of the world. That is one of the key prompts that their navigation template contains. When we deal with the indissoluble 'being-in-the-world', when we navigate through it, we are actually *becoming* with it. So if that young man bouncing down that dry river bed in South Africa in 1980 had adopted the leaders' navigational stance and template he would have stopped, thought about his prior learning of rivers and tributaries, listened to his wife and spent a little time looking at the terrain. Perhaps, just perhaps, he would have then noticed that the land was sloping downwards towards the sea, which was in the general direction of where he wanted to go. Then he would have thought: 'we can deal with this'.

As a professional manager and coach, rather than an academic researcher, this work has been full of tributaries of uncertainty. Having no experiential model for this work other than minor forays into field research many years ago, I looked for security in others' templates: in the works and models of established researchers, in advisers and mentors. Essential and enormously helpful as all those sources were, eventually I had to make my own choices. Ironically the process or rigour was far less daunting than the scope. My default question, as I dived into yet another literature search, or reflected on the impact and limitations of the findings was 'what am I missing?' Perhaps that realisation would have helped me back in 1980.

In conducting this research, I looked for validation from the leaders who provided the data in the first place. I did this repeatedly because I became increasingly convinced that the danger in constructivist grounded research is constructing prematurely. I endeavoured to ensure that the flow and direction of the data was at least recognisable to the sources of that data along the way. These research participants may not have called the result of their early experiences a navigational stance but they did link their learning to an early view of the world. Similarly, they did not call the tools and characteristics they use to *continue* learning a navigation template but they strongly identified with and utilised its ingredients. When they disagreed or did not like what I said, they told me.

C2, in her response to the themes and copy of the memorandum I sent her, wrote by email:

I have tried hard to find fault with the attached but actually it is an excellent insight into the hidden drivers – both positive and negative – to my effectiveness.

How you drilled down to the real issues is impressive to read back

Can't challenge the attached

Don't like it.... but it's true..... (C2)

A2, as previously outlined, disagreed with my construction of her navigational stance from being heard in a large, unruly family.

G2 had no hesitation in calling my expression of 'innate confidence' "clumsy".

G3 in his final reflective conversation firmly disagreed with my assertion that “No one talked of a long-term specific purpose”. Clearly, in his view, there was “the restoration of British sovereignty to the Falkland Islands”.

It has been my aim that these research participants actually felt that they had participated in this dialogue, regardless of whether they agreed (and I do not know if they do) with the developing theory.

The most reluctant conclusion I reached in this work was that these leaders did not learn primarily from disorienting dilemmas, even if I qualified it by the word ‘major’. After all, was not one of the initial incentives for writing this work, my own ‘pivotal incident’, namely, being labelled a non-finisher? And did I not *specifically* ask the question: do leaders learn from pivotal incidents in their lives?

One of the propositions flowing from the developing theory is that successful leaders manage pivotal incidents effectively.. There are very few eureka moments because they are regularly questioning their assumptions, challenging themselves and so on. In terms of that conclusion, it can be argued that I accepted my father’s label of me because I was not in a manageable partnership with my world. If my father, the powerful opponent, said I was a ‘non-finisher’ then that is what I was. However, it can also be argued that that was not a pivotal incident at all, that it was simply remembered as representing one. It could well have been simply another nail in my developing navigational stance. It was the clearest and therefore the most memorable – but not the pivotal – incident.

On reflection, Jarvis (2006) has a particularly effective way of avoiding the association of learning with the eureka moment, the major event. He says that learning occurs as a result of a “disjuncture” – a disconnect – that means that we cannot deal with a situation on automatic pilot and therefore need to rethink. That disjuncture is not an event – pivotal or otherwise. It is a state of understanding, a disconnect in meaning-making. It could be caused by an incident but not necessarily so. Confusion can equally be caused by my deliberate exploration of areas where I have a tiny (or large) gap in knowledge. In that case, it can be said, transformative learning occurred as a result of my own self-directed exploration not because of a pivotal incident. Therefore proposition five of this theory could state that:

- These leaders do not learn principally from pivotal incidents because they are in default transformational mode.

- They can learn from disjunctures that, as a result of their default mould, they are likely to have driven themselves.
- They do not principally learn from externally imposed disorienting dilemmas but from self-directed orienting exploration.

This study does not argue that there are no pivotal incidents for anybody or disorienting dilemmas do not trigger learning for anyone. Its concern is that the emphasis on disorienting dilemmas or pivotal incidents focuses on exceptions: the exceptional event and (at best) how we deal with it. What this research shows is that significant learning is achieved by growing consistently with the world – rather than bumping up against it in crisis. Dewey (1910) called this the “business of education” (p.56), “cultivat[ing] deep seated and effective habits of discriminating tested beliefs from mere assertion and opinions” (p.56). The words cultivate, deep seated and habits are not the stuff of crisis but of patient, diligent, consistent ‘becoming’. Of course, learning is a leap, as Dewey (1910) also put it, but the harder you train the higher you leap. And that is precisely what these leaders have been doing: training consistently to leap.

One of my concerns was that the sample of research participants may have been too narrow. The ten leaders lived and worked either in mainland Europe, Britain or North America. There was no purposeful sampling for ethnicity, gender, age and cultural or geographical diversity. The criteria for inclusion were that they were leaders with significant authority and influence at the apex of an institution or organisation. Could that affect the reliability of the research? As outlined earlier, the principal application of this research is intended to be in top-level leadership coaching in “corporations and institutions that are largely based on US, UK and European models”. The focus of this work, therefore, was to understand the experience of learning of those leaders who operated successfully in that context. They all succeeded regardless of their ethnicity, cultural background, location or gender. They all identified at a noteworthy level with the developing theory. Therefore, in terms of the focus of this work, I would argue that the research was not compromised. Does it severely limit the generalised validity of the theory? The researcher does not make the claim that this theory applies to all leaders in all contexts at whatever rank. That has not been tested in this study. Meyer’s work on culture maps (2014) is helpful in considering how different leaders from different cultures think about and engage in leadership, and how it is best expressed in their particular location. There is nothing in her book that is incompatible with the navigational stance and template outlined here.

The issue of gender arose in the case of two leaders in this research: A2 and C2. A2 in her final reflective conversation, very specifically said when discussing her navigational stance, "That was the way I could be heard as a girl". In a community where, as she put it, "Boys were the intelligent ones, the beautiful ones" she proved her worth by being rational, serious and reliable. Her stance was therefore as a direct result of her gender. In her last discussion in this study she reflected that reaching out to her network or utilising mentors may have been inhibiting in that "I am a woman and the interpretation is 'girls need help'".

C2 felt similarly inhibited in networking:

Professional networking as a woman is not... Is not desirable except that you stay sober, and you can't be seen... I'm always conscious of the fact that if I do talk to a man for too much sometimes it gets misconstrued, either by them or by others. And I find it far easier not to do it. Any sort of... Too much soft, social networking, if you see what I mean.

This inhibition is certainly reflected in A2's low score (2) for utilising 'mentors'. However, C2 scored herself 5 on this. Interestingly the only other low score for utilising mentors was that of C1 – who gave himself a 3.

As regards race or ethnicity, the only person of colour was A1. His interview certainly makes it clear that Britain in the 1960's and 70's was not an easy place for "black families" and that it was "unheard of, especially for a black guy" to be applying for a post of deputy head teacher at the age of 29. However, it did not stop him from applying and succeeding. As argued, earlier, his stance was that being black was a reality and it was fine and good.

7.3.2. Ideas for further research

As mentioned earlier, it would certainly be a valuable piece of future research to compare navigational stances across a wider range of leadership levels in organisations. In addition to contrasting those stances with the ones identified in this study, it would be valuable to assess whether individual's templates reinforced or tried to adapt or rebalance a 'problematic' stance. If one's stance is that the world is 'a competitor and not to be trusted,' would the navigation template develop tools to enforce that stance or to cloak it (from that untrustworthy world)? Whereas this study has worked with a clearly definable level of organisational leadership, any future research may find it more difficult if the focus is on 'leadership' as a broader concept. As Yuki (2013) has discovered there are as many

definitions and concepts of 'leader' as there are researchers in the subject. For there to be value in any such future research, it needs to be clearly applicable.

The 11 characteristics of the navigation template are those identified by this researcher from the data provided by these research participants. There are at least three research questions that could take these findings further:

1. Are there more characteristics that could be identified within this level of leadership?
2. Would these characteristics emerge in successful organisational leaders in other cultural and geographical contexts?
3. How consistently do leaders at this level actually practise the template characteristics?

This second question may indicate, as a by-product, the level of cultural and/or structural globalisation we have achieved in organisations or, at least, the presence of the tension between globalised structures and localised leadership style. Many commercial corporations throughout the world are structured similarly. That does not mean they are structured around a Western model. After all, the influence of the Japanese models of management at such organisations as Matsushita (Pascale & Athos, 1982; 1986) was very significant in the last two to three decades of the twentieth century. Even now, is Jaguar an Indian or a British company – or does it follow structures and styles that could be followed anywhere in the world? The academic and military models of leadership may be equally global. Blackhurst (2012) reported in the (London) Telegraph that at Sandhurst, "Foreign cadets, who pay fees of £48,000 a year, make up 10 per cent of the intake and currently come from 34 countries." Notwithstanding all these cross influences, do national or cultural leadership styles play a role in the characteristics of the stance and template? In fact, although an authoritarian style of leadership may be admired in a particular country does it actually lead to sustainable and transformative success or is it short term and repressive of precious resources and talent?

How consistently do leaders at this level actually practise the template characteristics?

The data in this study has shown that they do practise them and that they identify with them to a large extent. However, it may be useful to understand just how consistently they do so – and what impact that level of consistency has on the transformative success of the leader?

There is a fragility in very senior leaders that is difficult to appreciate precisely because of their pragmatic navigational approach. It is an area that has not been explored to any extent in this study but could benefit both from the application of this theory and from further research. If very senior leaders are in default transformational mode why do so many fall foul of the leadership bubble? Why do we experience political leaders (particularly) as progressively surrounding themselves with sycophants? As Milbank wrote of President Obama in the Washington Post (2014), "By surrounding himself with long time loyalists in the White House and on his national-security team, he has left himself with advisers lacking either the stature or the confidence to tell him when he's wrong".

My own experience in working with leaders is that the more senior and public the office, the more consistent, intense and fierce the scrutiny and criticism they face. The 'tipping point' between enabling transparency and accountability, and constructing a siege mentality is a fairly fine one. What occurs, within the terms of this developing theory, is that under severe and consistent pressure the navigational stance is changed from 'partnered with the world' to 'the world is the enemy'. What would be valuable in future research is whether consistent and conscious usage of the leaders' navigation template can mitigate that distortion. Perhaps a case study approach would be most valuable – although extremely difficult to arrange. A leader with significant public exposure (a chief executive of a high profile public organisation or a political office holder) could be enabled to establish a 'navigation template maintenance unit', (a modern day court jester) constantly monitoring and reminding the leader to maintain the template even in the face of huge pressure to 'lower the drawbridge'. It would take courage from both the leader and the unit even if a leader could be persuaded to a) fund such a unit and b) allow the publication of even anonymised research.

7.3.3. Impact and value

The value (and originality) of this developing theory is grounded in the following propositions:

- The basis of success in these top leaders is rooted in their learned relationship with the world. They can 'see a way through' not because they think they're clever or better than anyone else but because the world is at best an ally and at worst 'not an enemy'.
- Everything in this theory is about experiential learning. A fundamental proposition is that individuals learn to be leaders – and they need to work very hard to be successful leaders.

- We can identify which tools and characteristics leaders need to develop, practise and apply to be successful.
- Leadership is not a role. It is a job. It may help the leader to be charismatic but unless s/he maintains and develops the characteristics of the navigation template, charisma, passion, charm, the art of influence, resilience (and all those personal attributes that have been so lauded as leadership qualities) may be nothing more than weapons to attain and remain in power.

What value and impact can this emerging theory have on the practice of executive coaching, on leadership and on academic theory?

7.3. 4. Application to Executive Coaching

This developing theory firmly places the starting point of leadership as a collaborative relationship with the world. The coaching profession has been inundated with manuals and processes on how to be a successful leader: what to do to improve one's self-awareness or change one's 'leadership style' or delegation. What coaching, in the main, has been effective in achieving is developing incremental improvements in the abilities of 'leaders' (in the widest possible definition) to 'do better', particularly in specific contexts. The theory developed here focuses, for the first time, on the relationship that leaders (individuals and groups who have very considerable impact on our lives) have with the world; on how they have learned *to make space for themselves* in that world – as partner, competitor or opponent. It addresses three vital issues:

1. Do these individuals regard us (their world, after all) as enemies or allies?
2. What relationship with us/their world is underpinned by their behaviours, tools, weapons and characteristics?
3. Can we change that originating attitude and the template with which they conduct their lives and their leadership?

Coaching benefits from this focus at two levels: working with top leaders and developing future top leaders.

At the top leadership level, the coach-mentor is often reduced to strategic adviser, counsellor and confidant, or mentor. The reason is that at this tier both coach and client tend to see the assignment as refining or making minor adjustments to

already successful skills. It's a piecemeal approach which, once achieved, allows the leader to get on with it. It treats a symptom and does not approach the 'whole person in the whole context'. If we claim to be practitioners of experiential learning, and at least *recognise* the advocacy of Dewey, Kolb and Jarvis that learning is holistic, then it is time to practice *holistic coaching*. This is particularly true if we are working with individuals who have – or will have – a very significant impact on the economic, political and social contexts of this planet.

Using this approach, the coach can now coach for transformative leadership by using benchmarks for both a sustainable relationship with the world and for 'doing business with it'. The coach would help both current and future leaders understand and manage how their navigational stance has an impact on their intentionality and behaviour in their world, and then reinforce that change by practising the benchmark navigation template. It is an approach that is holistic, pragmatic and achievable. It has a holistic infrastructure but enables very practical and specific actions that the client can explore, reflect on and adapt.

As would be expected from a coaching practitioner, I have started to explore the application of this theory in my own practice. So far I have tentatively started working with two individual clients with this *holistic coaching* model. Both were new clients and both were senior but not board-level organisational leaders. I explained the basis and logic of this model to them and asked if they would be willing for me to explore their 'navigational stance' and current template through dialogue. Both said they found the initial findings useful and moving. One echoed my own misgivings expressed earlier that the stance could be seen as a one-dimensional 'signature'. It confirmed that this approach must not degenerate into an excuse for creating yet another model for 'the characteristics of a leader'. The navigational stance needs to be (at least) three dimensional in its structure: as an attitude towards the world, as relative power to act with/against/to the world, and as emanating from specific contextual conditions. It is, in effect the 'orientating' rather than the disorientating dilemma. The next stage in this exploration is to identify with these two clients their current navigation templates and how these both help and hinder their work as leaders.

7.3.5. Leaders and leadership

I will be (almost) satisfied if this research study merely shows leaders that a group of their peers have become extremely successful not because they are the best at being 'leaders' but because they learn how to do the best possible with all the

resources they can muster. None of these research participants, as far as the data establishes, set out to develop the characteristics of a transformative leader; none of them said to me 'I wanted to be a good leader'. They set out to do a job. G2 discovered after he joined the army that he was "quite good at this leading business". C1 wanted to share his ideas and build up the business. A1 wanted to "capture an organisation" to put his ideas and vision into practice. They all became successful because they shared one attribute: they could co-produce with the world. They could do business with the world.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will reduce the still lingering belief that leaders are born and not made. They *learn* to manage the world and so develop the confidence and skills to be sustainable leaders. The learning comes first; the confidence is a consequence. G4 said he was not a particularly confident child and neither was G2 who described himself as "hiding" after his father died. Even C1 described himself in his final reflections as a child who did not share frames of reference either with his parents or his school. However, they all were able to develop tools and skills to work with the world.

Perhaps, if we adopt the model and propositions of this developing theory we may be able understand not only how to develop healthy, sustainable leaders but also to deal with, and defend ourselves against, the sometimes sociopathic, often vengeful and, too frequently, inept leaders that appear at the apex of our organisations, institutions and countries. If the leader's navigation stance is founded in enmity to the world then the logical conclusion is that he will act with – at the least – a deep suspicion of the world. He will not work with, and for its benefit but to ensure that he overcomes its threatening character.

As we have seen there is an extensive literature on leadership. However, it would appear, there is very little that creates a pragmatic model for holistically understanding and developing those individuals who can make or break our societies.

7.3.6. Academic theory

This developing theory will hopefully extend the debate on leaders with authority and power. In addition to the suggestions for future research there are several areas of further exploration and discussion that are of value to academic theory.

Leading experiential learning researchers and theorists (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2000; Jarvis, 2006; Illeris, 2007a and 2007b;) have stressed dissonance, the

disorienting dilemma and conflict as the source of learning. I speculated in this work that these concepts may themselves be grounded in Piaget's (1977) concept of equilibrium. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Illeris (2007b) talks very specifically about the incentive to learn being to "constantly maintain our *mental and bodily balance*" (p.26). The research participants in this study did not indicate they were looking for mental and bodily balance. They were looking to 'deal with the world' as effectively as possible. Dialogue with these leaders revealed that they were all looking, in some way, to create space for themselves in the world. They did so even when that dealing and navigation created disequilibrium. C1 searches for frames of reference both outside those of his parents and his local community. A1 constantly pushes, and navigates outside boundaries of familiarity or even balance. He re-sits his examinations of his own volition. He applies 50 times for the post of deputy head as a 29-year-old newly qualified teacher in 1970's Britain. A2 takes on the most miserable jobs to pay her way through college and then goes on to challenge medical, religious and social authority at risk to her own health. The argument made here proposes that what these leaders pursued is not "mental and bodily balance" (Illeris, 2007b, p.26) but learning, the experience of learning in the world.

What may be valuable to academic theory is further exploration of the (childhood) *sources* of experiential learning. Piaget's (1977) assumption seems to underpin much of the theory of transformative learning. And the work of Mezirow and his colleagues, hugely valuable as it is, has not ventured to question the validity of that assumption by original research into childhood learning. What seems to have separated adult learning from the narrative of the child is the assumption (Mezirow, 2000) that children receive inputs from the world in an essentially passive and unquestioning manner. If they do that then there is very little we can gain by exploring the child to understand and guide the adult. If, on the other hand, we work with the possibility that the child actively and curiously seeks the most effective partnership with the world – clearly limbically at first through physical and sensory exploration as outlined by Lewis, Amini and Lannon (2001), and then progressively more consciously and holistically – then the child's 'stance' becomes key to the development of human beings.

Finally, this exploration may also contribute to the (ongoing) debate of the place of philosophy in experiential learning. I interpreted Heidegger's (1953) concept of Dasein as the nature of being human, the experience of which results in both an understanding and interpretation of being-in-the-world. Heidegger (1953) argued that ontically, when we say we understand something we are saying we are "able to handle a thing', 'being up to it'" (p.134). It seems that this is very similar to my

'being able to manage, deal with or do business with the world'. I would suggest that the navigational stance may well be the identification of *the* being-in-the-world: the articulation of what the being in the world can do with the world. That is less important in this debate than the fact that philosophers such as Heidegger, Husserl and Spinoza have played as important a role in the development of what is hopefully a pragmatically applicable theory, as have the researchers and practitioners cited.

7.3.7 Dissemination

As a confirmed non-finisher, I intend to use this work as the basis for a further series of projects in a number of ways.

First, I have finally understood that my father was correct: I am not a finisher. Learning never finishes. So, I am a continuer. Through this research I will continue to explore how my own navigational stance and template have an impact on my relationship with the world, and to establish a consistent and sustainable partnership with it.

Second, I shall continue to build on the already emerging impact of the research conclusion on my work as an executive coach. I have alluded to this above but hope to continue to apply holistic coaching to the leaders with whom I now work and those with whom I will work in the future. This is, of course, continuing research as I experiment with how the findings are applied to the real life situations of these executives.

The thesis itself will be adapted into a book aimed at leaders and coaching practitioners. This book will build on both the theory and practice of what I am now calling 'holistic coaching'.

The theory and propositions will be adapted into a coaching model, which will be utilised in my own practice as well as published as part of the book. In the first instance I would like to write two articles: one for an academic journal outlining the research, its conclusions and the models emerging. I hope this will generate discussion and engagement with other academics to fine tune the conclusions and their applications. The second article will be written for practitioners outlining how it works and how it can be applied within the field of coaching. Again, I want to hear from practitioners about how the model works in practice, and not just in theory.

I intend, with the assistance of academic colleagues and administrators, to present a series of lectures at colleges and universities in Europe, the US and the UK. I also will ask to be included as a speaker in coaching and leadership-related international conferences.

I find workshops the best contexts in which to generate dialogue on the themes of this research and gather information from the experiences of others working in the coaching field. I will develop and market a series of workshops, based on this developing theory, for the development of current and future leaders as well as coaching practitioners.

7.3.8. Closing reflections

In many ways, this research study has been the epitome of the tension between the 'disorienting dilemma' and what I called the 'orientating' exploration. It was in conducting this research that I learned to research. When there was a gap in my knowledge I looked to find that knowledge. But just as often I looked to find the gap as well. In doing so I did not seek bodily and mental balance – it sometimes felt *extremely* unstable –but to do the job.

'To do the job' is an interesting concept, because the extent of that job was never clear, particularly research in the vast field of learning. So, I was forced to discover what 'doing the best possible until the possible is no longer best' really means. Delving into a particular literature for weeks before realising that it would not necessarily enrich *this* research was a case in point.

This research taught me to navigate. If I couldn't pilot the boat through this channel then let's try a couple of others. And whatever you do, don't panic. Panic blinds.

But probably most of all, this research taught me that I was truly in partnership with the world – and that I was stuck with it. I could either view the various illnesses, death in the family, moving country and financial demands as the world throwing up barriers, or just what happens over four years. Of course, and most crucially, none of this work was conducted in isolation from my world. Thoughts were explored, challenged and reviewed in discourse with others. Directions were adopted with guidance and mentorship. Words were written, cut and re-written in dialogue. And even literature was reviewed in my endless (and not always inaudible) muttered conversation with the authors.

Through it all, I discovered, I cannot do a thing without my world.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Invitation

Dear

Doctoral programme on the experience of learning of top leaders.

I am a former chief executive and currently a strategic mentor and coach.

Through the Institute of Work Based Learning at the University of Middlesex in the United Kingdom, I am undertaking a doctoral research programme to explore how top leaders experience their learning whilst in office.

This programme examines how leaders at the pinnacle of their careers bring together past experiences, intuition and new understanding whilst they are in action: in environments that are often hostile to vulnerability, reflection, innovation and learning. Understanding, at first hand, how these leaders experience that learning is, I believe, hugely valuable both to dealing with the essential fragility of good leadership and to enabling the development of future leaders.

This qualitative, narrative based, research will be conducted amongst a small sample of corporate chief executives, academics at president or vice chancellor level and military leaders who have held at least who have held at least the rank of General or Brigadier.

I would be honoured if you would be prepared to work with me in this programme.

All research will be conducted under strict rules of confidentiality and anonymity to maximise not only your protection but also to enable a safe environment for rich and secure reflection.

The research itself would be conducted around three 2 hour conversations within a period of 12 months – followed by close consultations with you to ensure that what goes into the final document reflects your experience. This means, in essence that I would check every conversation and my *understanding* of key elements of that conversation with you: the purpose of the research is to understand your *experience* – not my interpretation of it.

If you require it, all recordings and transcriptions will be returned to you after the completion of the doctorate and, of course, I am very happy to discuss the security of how I gather, transcribe, store and present our communications.

I would clearly value your involvement and strongly believe that you would be participating in an important piece of work which would provide a unique view from inside the 'leadership bubble'.

For further information I attach my profile and refer you to my website (www.stephenbarden.org). Should you require it, I am also very happy to refer you to my supervisor, Professor David Lane, as well as the programme administrator at the IWBL, Stephen Watts. I am also prepared to send you the proposal for this doctoral programme which was submitted and accepted by the Programme Approval Panel in October 2010

Please let me know if you are interested in taking part –and whether we could take this conversation further.

Kind regards,

Stephen Barden

Encl.

Appendix 2. Email example

On 13 June 2011 10:48, Stephen Barden Coaching <stephen@stephenbarden.org> wrote:

Dear General [...]

I'm following up your recent exchange of emails with [...] Thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me. Could you let me know when it would be convenient for me to call you to briefly explain what this is all about – perhaps either today or Wednesday?

I'm flexible today any time after 1600; Wednesday – any time after 1100. If neither of those days is convenient for you, could let me have some alternate times?

I look forward to our talking – and meeting.

Warm regards,

Stephen

UK office: +44.2071250217 German office: +493082718073

UK mobile: +44.7774499068 German

mobile: +4917630315489

www.stephenbarden.org

Appendix 3. Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research programme and for an extraordinary first conversation. I value both the time and the personal care you have provided to this work enormously.

One of the requirements of the university is to maintain a record showing that I have clearly explained the process, expectations and ethical assumptions – and that you are happy with them. Hence this letter of consent

My research programme looks at the experience of learning of leaders while they are in office. I (with your help) will be examining that through the following process:

- 3 x 2 hour conversations in which we look at your learning experiences at conscious and intuitive levels
- These conversations will be recorded and then transcribed as accurately as possible – including emphases, pauses and restatements. The transcriptions – together with my suggested identified themes – will be returned to you for your comment and verification. As our conversations progress, I hope that the themes will become more apparent – so enabling us to focus on what you experience as your more significant areas of learning.
- In the latter part of the programme, once all the conversations have taken place, and following a period of immersion on my part, I will be sending you anonymised extracts from across the sample of participant leaders to enable a discussion on possible convergences and or contrasts in experience.
- Finally, once I have written up the work, I will send you the relevant extracts for your release and consent.

All our conversations will be recorded and may take place face to face, on the phone or by video. In the first conversation, I discussed and agreed with you my procedures for ensuring your anonymity and the on-going security of the documentation and recordings.

At this time, I would also like to ensure that you are comfortable with a clear route for complaint should you at any time feel there is any breach of ethical values; first through discussion with me and thereafter by referral to my supervisor Professor David Lane.

Stephen Barden Coaching Limited,
Registered office: 3 Hillcroft Avenue, Purley, Surrey, CR8 3DJ
Telephones: (UK) +44207 1250217 (Germany) +493082718073
stephen@stephenbarden.org www.stephenbarden.org

Finally, the university requires me to obtain a release from you that you are prepared to work with me on the basis of the terms set out in this letter. Could you please sign where indicated below and return to me? I would think a scanned copy would be sufficient.

I look forward to our talking again soon.

All the best,

Stephen

I agree to participate in your doctoral research programme and consent to the information I provide to be used in the final doctoral thesis subject to the terms outlined within this letter.

Appendix 4.Signed NDA

DATED

Thursday 17th March 2011

NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

between

STEPHEN BARDEN

and

VIRTUAL PA COMPANY



THIS AGREEMENT is dated Thursday 17th March

PARTIES

- (1) Stephen Barden in his own capacity and as Director of Stephen Barden Coaching Limited. (Stephen Barden)
- (2) Virtual PA Company incorporated and registered in England and Wales with company number 04220706 whose registered office is at 5 Flag Business Exchange, Vicarage Farm Road, Peterborough, PE1 5TX. (the Company)
- (3)

BACKGROUND

The company is employed by Stephen Barden to provide administration services. These support services include diary management, appointments, correspondence and transcriptions for both Stephen Barden Coaching and for Stephen Barden in his doctoral research programme with Middlesex University. All this work results in Virtual PA (and specifically the individuals assigned to supporting Stephen Barden) having access to the identities of clients, research participants and other 3rd parties who require to remain anonymous and confidential

1. DEFINITIONS

The definitions in this clause apply in this agreement.

Company Software: the software programs owned by the Company and licensed to the Customer listed in Schedule 1.

Information: all data stored on the Company's System and/or any data accessible whether within the physical environment of the Company's offices or buildings, or held on remote devices such as laptop computers, or portable hard drives, or any data which is accessed remotely from the Company's System, or replicated or disseminated in any other way howsoever. This also includes any information that is made available, verbally or in written form, to the employees of the Company in their capacity as service provider to Stephen Barden.

Objective: provision of support services to Stephen Barden

System: the Company's computer system.

2. NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

- 2.1 The Company shall not, without the prior written consent of Stephen Barden, either:
 - (a) communicate or otherwise make the Information available to any other person or entity; or

- (b) by insinuation assist any other person to identify clients, research participants and any other associates of Stephen Barden
- (c) use the Information itself for any commercial, industrial or other purpose whatsoever other than the Objective; or
- (d) copy, adapt, or otherwise reproduce the Information save strictly for the purposes of the Objective.

2.2 The Company may disclose the Information or any part thereof, only with the prior consent of Stephen Barden, to any of its employees who needs access to the Information in connection with the Objective. In such an event the disclosing party agrees to ensure, prior to such disclosure, that the employee in question is made aware of the confidential nature of the Information and understands that he/she is bound by conditions of secrecy no less strict than those set out here. The Company agrees to monitor the use of the Information by these employees and to enforce their obligations of confidence at the request of Stephen Barden.

2.3 The obligations contained in this Condition 3 shall not apply or shall cease to apply to such part of the Information as the Company can show to the reasonable satisfaction of Stephen Barden:

- (a) has become public knowledge other than through the fault of the Company or one of its employees or directors to whom it has been disclosed in accordance with Clause 2.2 above; or
- (b) or
- (c) has been received from a third party who neither acquired it in confidence from Stephen Barden, nor owed Stephen Barden a duty of confidence in respect of it.

3. **PROPERTY RIGHTS**

3.1 The Information and all related documentation are proprietary to Stephen Barden. The Company acknowledges that any disclosure pursuant to this agreement shall not confer on the Company or any of its employees, associates or employees any intellectual property or other rights in relation to the Information.

3.2 Ownership of all complete or partial copies of the Information shall at all times remain with Stephen Barden. The Company agrees to mark any copies of the Information which it may make in any tangible medium with a notice that such copy belongs to Stephen Barden.

3.3 In the event that the Company is notified by a third party that that party claims rights in the Information or that use of the Information for the Objective infringes any right of that third party, the Company agrees to immediately notify Stephen Barden and, at Stephen Barden's request, to immediately cease use of the Information.

4. GENERAL

- 4.1 The persons signing this agreement on behalf of the Company confirm that they are authorised to enter into this agreement on the Company's behalf and to bind the Company to its terms and conditions.
- 4.2 No variation of this agreement shall be effective unless it is in writing and signed by or on behalf of all parties.
- 4.3 **Writing or written** includes faxes but not e-mail or any other form of electronic communication except where expressly provided to the contrary.
- 4.4 This agreement shall be interpreted and construed in accordance with English law. However, the Company may enforce the Company's obligations of confidence in the courts of any jurisdiction having competence to issue an injunction directly enforceable against the Company.

This agreement has been entered into on the date stated at the beginning of it.

Signed by Stephen Barden for an on behalf of himself and Stephen Barden Coaching Limited Stephen Barden
Signed by Sally Wells for and on behalf of Virtual PA Company S. Wells Director

Appendix 5. Sample level of letter of confidence

From: [...]

Subject: RE: confidential: DProf preferences/references etc

Date: 15 October 2012 18:57:43 CEST

To: 'stephen barden' <stephen@stephenbarden.org>

Reply-To: [< >]

Dear Stephen

Thank you for your email. [...]'s preferences are as follows: -

1. Country (UK)
2. Type/Sector is okay
3. Fully coded
4. Coded
5. Yes please, disguise references to birthplaces, locations of significant events, etc.
6. 'Leading player in the education sector'
7. No alarm bells sounding

Kind regards

[...]

Personal Assistant to [...]

[...]

From: stephen barden [mailto:stephen@stephenbarden.org] **Sent:** 08 October 2012 14:44 **To:** stephen barden **Subject:** confidential: DProf preferences/references etc

I hope all is well with you; please forgive the generic (although hopefully anonymised!) email. In order to ensure the level of anonymity with which you would be comfortable in my thesis could you please complete the short questionnaire below? Could you also please take another look at the transcript and check whether any anecdotes that you told me could be an obvious give away, unless certain aspects are disguised.

Currently I plan to refer to you by a simple code of an alphabetic letter, representing your sector (A for academic, C for CEO, G for `General) followed by a number. Each research participant is identified, as applicable, as a leader in the academic/educational sector; military leader (army, airforce or navy); Corporate/institutional CEO. I am also keen to ensure that the gender of the research participant is identified.

The rest is up to you as per below:

13. Location of institution/employer/workplace

- Please state preferences:
 - Country (UK, USA, China); or
 - Continent (Europe, North America, Asia)

2. Identification of institution: I would suggest identification should be by type/sector. For example "A leading research university in the EU" or "A financial service company in....." or the Army in...." However, it's important that you're comfortable with the level of identification. In certain instances, for example, the gender of the participant combined with the location and sector of the institution may make you very recognisable.

3. References to third parties in anecdotes

- named
- fully coded

4. References you make to other institutions

- named (if generic) otherwise
 - named
 - coded

5. significant locations:

◦ in some instances these may identify you only to people who know you well; in others it may well be an obvious clue to wider audience. Please let me know whether you wish me to disguise references to birthplaces, locations of significant events, etc. Bear in mind that some of the events may not make any sense at all unless the location is revealed.

6. Title:

◦ Apart from the generic title references mentioned above, please let me know how you would like to be referred to in the write up: eg: a general, a * star general, a corporate CEO, A university president, an Executive head teacher etc...

7. Anecdotes:

◦ as mentioned earlier, please check if any alarm bells are sounding with any of the anecdotes you may have told me.

I am bound to have missed something in this list, so please feel free to add any preferences. In addition, I will of course keep a careful eye on things and if I am in doubt over any aspect during the final stages, i will come back and check with you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

All the best,

Stephen



UK office: +44.2071250217 German office: +493082718073 UK
mobile: +44.7774499068 German mobile: +4917630315489

www.stephenbarden.org

Appendix 6. Sample update letter

From: <heather@stephenbarden.org>

Subject: Stephen Barden - Thesis Update

Date: 21 March 2014 13:58:34 CET

To: [...]

Dear [...]

Just to let you know that I have now (finally!) reached the closing stages of this thesis and am currently pulling together the themes that are common to the majority of leaders I interviewed. As agreed earlier in the process I will be sending you these in the next 2 weeks with a few questions - to which you may either reply to in writing or in a short telephone call; as you prefer. Thank you for your extraordinary patience and I hope you will indulge me one more time. Heather, my PA, will be contacting you shortly to check on your availability and to make an appointment if you prefer to go the phone call route.

Thank you again. I will always value your generosity of thought and time on this project.

All my best,

Stephen



UK office: +44.2071250217 German office: +493082718073 UK
mobile: +44.7774499068 German mobile: +4917630315489 German personal:

Appendix 7. Memo for validation
EXTRACT FROM MEMORANDUM ON A1 INTERVIEW NO.1 FOR HIS COMMENTS AND,
HOPEFULLY, VALIDATION.

Process

As with the other interviews so far, I followed this pattern:

Read the transcript line by line

Within the flow of the narrative, code 'significant events' (initial coding)

(how did I identify what is significant?)

By:

A1's telling me that they are significant;

my revisiting repeatedly to check if my initial perception remains;

checking their significance within the narrative as a whole.

An example of a): A1 tells me, in answer to my question about what had helped prepare him for this difficult school, "Failure, failure and failure". And he then goes on to tell me a fundamentally significant event in his life to illustrate the point.

(p.3)

And example of b) On a number of occasions, A1 talks about learning to be "good at a range of stuff" (p.4). He does not say so explicitly but it is "good at a range of stuff other than succeeding academically at school". After reading and re-reading, I coded this as "succeeding at acceptable other" because it continued to resonate with me as a significant milestone and learning

An example of c): A1 mentioned – as part of the narrative rather than as a significant event - the presence of strong mentor figures at junctures in his life. Looking at his overall development within the narrative as a whole they seem to me to have been very much part of his learning experience and worth probing further.)

Cluster events into broad themes

Introduce final themes

Initial coding

The coding was determined very much by the narrative. There were very clear milestones in A1's story which lent themselves to initial coding (mostly by quotes but also with some identifiers in my own words.

Life's preparing

The environment: "working against me" (p.2); "disincentives in the system" (p.3) "it's a system, it's the way they did it, they made a mistake" (p.6), "they wanted to learn but the environment was working against that basic instinct" (8)

Failure

Succeeding at a range of things

Deciding (to stay behind a year; to become a deputy head)

Commitment (to learning; to the difficult school)

Visioning the system/environment

Changing the environment

Controlling the environment

Doing

"I met this incredible guy who for some reason thought there was something about me..." (p.5)

"he could see that I could do the job" (p.6)

"I did have a director of education... who believed in me"

Sailing with the wind (p.13)

Dip sticking yourself (p.13)

"Touching, smelling, tasting constantly and feeding information into yourself."
(p.13)

Clustering and Focused Coding

I was very much aware – as with the other interviews – that there were echoes which could emerge as linking themes across interviews. I was also aware that doing so prematurely could block me from A1's experiences as I tried to force them into an emerging theory. So, I was careful not to use echoing language unless A1 himself used it. So, for example, I used neither "listening to the ground" nor "the geography" unless A1 did. He didn't; but he got very close with "Touching, smelling, tasting constantly and feeding information into yourself."

Unlike the other interviews, the transition from fragmented to themed coding was less progressive. A1 uses the words system and environment to talk about a system as impediment. However, when he talks about creating a new environment or climate, he does not name it at all. He expresses its characteristics (extent, values codes) but he does not call it anything. When I suggested that this was "a total experience" for teachers, pupils and parents", he responded with "Absolutely" and went on to develop that theme. Hence I focused in on "Failure by the System" and the "Total Experience" as two separate themes.

In addition, what A1 called "failure", I identified in my focused coding as two separate themes: "The Failure by the system" and "Being good at what I can/ at a range of stuff".

The clustering then began to emerge as follows:

Failure by the system

Succeeding at other

Deciding/committing

Challenger/mentor

Succeeding in the system

creating and managing a new environment

Final theming.

There is – certainly to me – a clear flow within that clustering. And it remains identifiable in my final theming which I will submit to A1 for his commentary and (hopefully) validation.

If there is an overall theme in A1's learning experience, it is – I believe – “I believed I would find a way through” (p.2).

This comes from his direct experience of the mistaken system: of mistaking him for his elder brother, assuming he was illiterate at the age of “9” and therefore consigning him to being “thick” in the remedial class (p.3). His reaction was not to simply accept being labeled thick as being “a failure”, but to “getting a degree of success in terms of my peers through being good at a range of stuff” (p.4). He found ‘a way through’ by what I call here “succeeding at acceptable other” – until the ‘other’ was no longer acceptable to him. When the ‘other’ options were no longer tolerable, he made a decision to be successful at the heart of this ‘mistaken system’.

The final themes that I have identified within the narrative of ‘finding a way through’ are as follows:

The mistaken system

He learned very early on that it was the system that failed, not him. Even when it failed him again and he did not gain an appointment as deputy head (until he made 40 -50 applications) he “didn’t internalize the failure. It’s a system, it’s the way they did it” (p.6) . It was, it seems to me, a blessing in disguise: not only did he see very early on that the system made mistakes but he could continue to succeed despite it.

Succeeding at acceptable other

He may have been labeled “thick” (*How did I know that? Remedial Class on the door and inside were other kids who couldn’t learn and who messed around...”) (p.3) but there were other options for success: “I was [...] Boxing Champion, I was a very gregarious guy, very physical, so people wanted to know me and wanted to be my friend. I thought that as ok” (p.4). This ‘other success’ became intolerable when he realized that “for me to go out into the marketplace with one O Level and succeed where my brother with a string of O Levels and recommendations for sport couldn’t get a job ... was not a bright idea”. (p.4)

The decision

“So I had to stay at school and I went into the fifth year again”. (p.4)

The decision was a gargantuan one – given his experience so far. It was, a life changing, life or death, decision to go through the system rather than around it. It

was, in many senses, his initiation into adulthood; and he made it alone. Neither his mother and mother nor his extended family understood the education system. They worked to give their children a home and to feed them but the decision had to be his own. His options had closed down: he had only one choice for success. "I remember in Year 9 going to the Careers officer. In my head I wanted to be a Pilot, he looked at my exam record and looked at me and he said you can be either a postman or join the army. Those are the options he gave me and I didn't fancy either of those" (p.5)

And with it came another blessing in disguise: "I hated being with those younger kids so I was able to just do some work" (p.5). He succeeded and moved to the Sixth Form.

The Challenger/Mentor

It was here that he encountered the first of what I have called his challenger/mentors. Tough individuals who, perhaps, had encountered a taste of his experience in their own lives who forced him "to really think for the first time that I could really achieve something academically". (p.5) Another Challenger/mentor appears – in the shape of "his really very bright, very cocky, extremely confident" (p.6) Welsh ex mariner who "could see that I could probably do the job" (p.6) and – after 40-50 job applications gave him a job as Deputy Head at a very young age. The third C/M was his director of education when he was appointed to his current school: "...who believed in me. She was a kick-ass woman, a formidable woman who'd been a head teacher in a very tough school in [...], at a time when there had been rampant racism and stuff and she was anti all of that and she had to stand strong so she was a very strong woman, very strong; so she recognised some of the qualities I had and she supported me and understood... people like me" (p.12). A1's narrative is certainly of an individual who singly worked his way through to success. But he is believed in, encouraged, pushed by significant individuals who had bumped up against an inadequate system themselves. While he may respect the power of the education and social system, his trust lies in those individuals who have triumphed in some way over it.

His decision to go for a deputy headship (on the road to a headship) seems again closely related to his relationship with the 'mistaken system': it was, as I interpret it, a decision to create an environment that encouraged learning in children rather than suppress what he knew in himself was a "default position to learn" (p.8)

The total experience

When he was appointed to his current school, he did not, as I see it, set about to change the environment but to create a completely new one. He says “what I needed to do was to change the environment” but his actions appear to me to be something more radical than that. “In my head I have the end game and the end game is a really highly functional , highly successful organisation which looks like the best you can get” (p.11)

Codifying the new environment: “I had to set up a set of expectations which were codified. This is what I expect, this is what you should do, this is what we are going to do for you!” (p.8). The code of expectations set up a model to reward “doing the right thing” and deal with transgressions consistently

Committing to the new environment: part of his code of expectations was his commitment that he would stay the course, unlike his predecessors.

Protecting the new environment: teachers who weren’t prepared to make the change ,left “they left because I insisted on it, they left and that made life a bit easier” (p.9)

Stabilising the new environment: those teachers who stayed added to the stability initiated by consistent behaviour, consistent management of expectations and consistent role modelling. The new and surviving teachers “started doing a bit of business and because they started doing a bit of business the classes became less volatile.. so the climate in the school got a little bit better and because it got a little bit better, kids started taking home homework and, guess what, the homework was then marked. This sent a signal to the parents about normality” (p.9).

Interestingly, there is an echo here of his earlier learning with a “mistaken system: he didn’t wait until the quality of teachers improved (which was his central plank), he found other options for success – which, in turn, began to attract teachers of quality.

Extending the environment : this was the beginning of the “total experience” that he was creating. Not only were the children and teachers part of the contract of expectations but so were the parents and the community- “the parents as well as the kids could pass judgement on us to what extent we were living up to that. On the other side, the code of expectation was also about the behaviour, was also about attitude, was also about buying into the brand so there was reference there”. (p.10) In turn he began to “extend my reach into the community and delegate” (p.10).

The total experience: not only is it a total experience for his pupils, parents and teachers but in order to ensure its success he becomes immersed within it (echoing Graham and Chris):

“You’re out there, touching smelling, tasting constantly and feeding information into yourself (p.13)

“you are dip-sticking yourself” (p.13)

“you’re telling people what’s going on, you’re warning them about what’s coming up next because of that relationship you have with the organisation” (p.13)

“you need it to become an extension of yourself, so every movement on that sail you feel it and you adjust to it accordingly” (p.13)

At the heart of this total experience, is A1’s early learning: that systems – particularly systems of an industrial scale, that move at a uniform pace – make mistakes and damage individuals. The experience he has tried to create is one that specifically caters for “people travelling at different speeds” and his “touching smelling, tasting constantly and feeding information into himself” is not simply to preserve his new environment but to ensure that no child is left behind.

Appendix 8a. Comparative themes

	A1	A2	A3	C1	C2	C3
CHALLENGE	Mistake	SELF C. / BEAT DISMANTLE N			FEEL FAIL - SHAME - PUNISHED - NO CARE	① PROJECT OUTS
SELF CONFIDENCE (EMOTION)	✓ YES	✓ SELF C. / BEAT DID		LISTEN TO THE SOUND OF HIS OWN FEET TO COME TO THE WHOLE.		② PRICE TO BE PAID FOR FAILURE
FORMATIVE? CURRENT?			LEARN TO FIGURE OUT AND MOVE FORWARD NEEDS TO LEARN - RETRY			③ VIBES
SELF CONFIDENCE INATE?	✓	✓	?		NO?	④ YES
Signature?						
DEALING WITH CHALLENGE	<p>① DID THE BEST I COULD DEAL WITH REALITY</p> <p>② CHOSE TO TAKE THE BEST POSSIBLE SOLUTION</p> <p>③ STUCK IT OUT UNTIL THERE WAS NO OTHER CHOICE</p> <p>④ DID NOT BLAME SELF OR OTHERS</p> <p>⑤ MENTORS</p> <p>⑥ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑦ VOTE</p>	<p>1. TAKE THE RATIONAL RESPONSIBLE SIDE</p> <p>2. STUCK IT OUT UNTIL THERE WAS NO OTHER CHOICE</p> <p>3. DID NOT BLAME SELF OR OTHERS</p> <p>4. SOCIAL SUPPORT</p> <p>5. DEALT WITH REALITY</p>	<p>MULTIPLE CHOICES OF ACTION - STAY OR CHANGE COURSE</p> <p>1. RETAINED INTEGRITY OF PERSONALITY</p> <p>2. CHALLENGED CONVENTIONAL WISDOM</p> <p>3. MENTORS</p> <p>4. RESEARCH</p> <p>5. THE BEST STEP (THE BEST)</p>	<p>① DULLED TO THE GROUND</p> <p>② BLEND</p> <p>③ RESEARCH</p> <p>④ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑤ DID THE BEST POSSIBLE</p> <p>⑥ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑦ RESEARCH</p>	<p>① ESCAPE THROUGH LOCAL SET</p> <p>② RESEARCH</p> <p>③ RESEARCH</p> <p>④ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑤ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑥ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑦ RESEARCH</p>	<p>① DEAL WITH IT</p> <p>② RESEARCH</p> <p>③ RESEARCH</p> <p>④ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑤ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑥ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑦ RESEARCH</p>
IMPACT OF DWC	<p>① OWN THE FACT - DO NOT TRY TO HIDE</p> <p>② RESEARCH</p> <p>③ RESEARCH</p> <p>④ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑤ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑥ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑦ RESEARCH</p>	<p>① RATIONAL & RESPONSIBLE</p> <p>② NO BLAME</p> <p>③ DID BEST</p> <p>④ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑤ CHOSE TO TAKE THE BEST POSSIBLE SOLUTION</p> <p>⑥ NO BLAME</p> <p>⑦ RESEARCH</p>		<p>① RESEARCH</p> <p>② RESEARCH</p> <p>③ RESEARCH</p> <p>④ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑤ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑥ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑦ RESEARCH</p>	<p>① RESEARCH</p> <p>② RESEARCH</p> <p>③ RESEARCH</p> <p>④ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑤ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑥ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑦ RESEARCH</p>	<p>① RESEARCH</p> <p>② RESEARCH</p> <p>③ RESEARCH</p> <p>④ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑤ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑥ RESEARCH</p> <p>⑦ RESEARCH</p>
IMPACT ON LSHIP						

Appendix 8b. Comparative themes

	G1 ① Fixing NES ② Use as a ③ Use as a ④ Use as a	G2 ① NI (broader) ② MOD (more specific) ③ NI	G3 ① NI (broader) ② NI (broader) ③ NI (broader)	
CHALLENGE	① Fixing NES ② Use as a ③ Use as a ④ Use as a	① NI (broader) ② MOD (more specific) ③ NI	① NI (broader) ② NI (broader) ③ NI (broader)	① Use of ② Use of ③ Use of ④ Use of
FORMATIVE?	① y?	① y	① y	① y
CURRENT	① y	① y	① y	① y
SELF CONF?	① ?	① ?	① ?	① Yes
DEALING WITH CHALLENGE	① Use of ② Use of ③ Use of ④ Use of	① NI - Training ② preparing for ③ 10-30 as to ④ Use of life and ⑤ Use of life and ⑥ Use of life and ⑦ Use of life and ⑧ Use of life and ⑨ Use of life and ⑩ Use of life and	① Use of ② Use of ③ Use of ④ Use of	① Use of ② Use of ③ Use of ④ Use of
IMPACT ON L'SHT	① Deep impact ② Impact on ③ Impact on ④ Impact on	① Deep impact ② Impact on ③ Impact on ④ Impact on	① Deep impact ② Impact on ③ Impact on ④ Impact on	① Deep impact ② Impact on ③ Impact on ④ Impact on
IMPACT ON L'SHT	① Deep impact ② Impact on ③ Impact on ④ Impact on	① Deep impact ② Impact on ③ Impact on ④ Impact on	① Deep impact ② Impact on ③ Impact on ④ Impact on	① Deep impact ② Impact on ③ Impact on ④ Impact on

Appendix 9. Final themes memo

The emerging theory:

1. Leaders experience their learning (and construct patterns for future learning) through the way they negotiate challenges in their lives. These challenges may be objectively trivial but resonate because they interact with perceptions, assumptions and context interacting with the individual at the time.
2. The challenges themselves have less of an impact on learning than the way in which they are *negotiated or navigated*. They could range from single, extremely traumatic incidents to ongoing, low level discontent.
3. In negotiating their challenges from an early age, leaders utilise a range of at least 12 identified characteristics and tools. Those leaders who display and/or utilise these themes *most widely* are also the most transformational in terms of their leadership.
4. The overriding learning characteristic of successful top leaders is that of negotiator¹, or navigator². Both require an intense sense of reality, understanding of context and alliances/support. In fact, both require all 12 Themes described below to perform the task effectively.
5. An effective form of coaching emerging leaders would enable clients to recognise the development of their current pattern of "challenge negotiation" followed by a programme, which facilitated the navigation of real and simulated challenges utilising the 12 Themes.

The 12 themes (that all leaders displayed in varying degrees)

1. **'Innate' characteristics:** Some leaders spoke of an 'innate self-confidence' or an 'innate curiosity' which they attributed directly with how they dealt with challenges. One leader articulated it as "I can see a way through this." Whether this characteristic is 'innate' or not, is less relevant than whether the participant had internalized it and believed it to be an integrated part of their persona.
2. **Strongly pragmatic:** When the best is not possible, they did the best possible.
3. **3 way challenges:** they constantly challenged themselves, others and (actively) enabled others to challenge them – both earlier in their lives and as leaders
4. **Absence of isolation and unilateralism:**
 - a. They sought social support (in early days support from friends, later from colleagues)

¹ Particularly as defined by the New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998): "find a way over or through (an obstacle or difficult path)".¹

² NODE (1998) defines 'navigation' as "the process or activity of accurately ascertaining one's position and planning and following a route."

- b. Solicited and used experience of others ("I wrapped myself in the experience of my staff")
 - c. There was a strong theme throughout all the interviews of decisions being taken with the support of others. What in fact was totally absent from all leaders (even those who felt themselves quite isolated) was unilateralism, whether as generator of ideas, or as executor of actions.
5. **No internalization of failure:** did not identify themselves with the defeat or disappointment of failure. They learned and moved on.
 6. **No blame:** similarly they tended not to blame. Even when they were patently 'let down' they tended to avoid blaming others – seeing it as a waste of time.
 7. **Reality:** an intense sense of what *is* rather than what ought to be, or might be.
 8. **Holistic:** this was not simply 'big picture' but a realistic understanding of the linkages within the greater 'ecosystem': be that the 'theatre of war', the local and national contexts of a school, the corporation as economic, social and political 'ecosystem'. This was certainly present in their leadership –and in many cases was a 'perception in progress' earlier.
 9. **Alert to constituents:** In earlier days they were alert to what was going on around them. As leaders they talked of 'listening to the ground,' 'walking the corridors', having 'trustworthy spies', 'listening to the buzzing in the woodwork', 'conversation by headset'
 10. **The negotiator/Navigator** (in a number of senses):
 - a. The participant outsider or the non-captive insider. While being able to use the language and behaviour of discourse, they were not captive to any specific interests in the environment. One leader called it 'balancing the dilemmas': the interests of the ecosystem and their ethical sense of what was right.
 - b. In the sense of navigating their way through a problem. (This appeared to be present both during earlier challenges and in leadership) This related to a number of other characteristics: if they were negotiators, why would they internalise failure or blame? Would they not – as negotiators – be wise to work on a basis of well-researched reality (utilising advice, support, their own antennae and challenges)? And would they not tend to pragmatism: to do the best possible even when the best was not possible?
 11. **Direction:** rather than a sense of purpose they seemed to have a sense of direction. So, for example, leaders talked about knowing that they wanted to 'get out' of their childhood; another talked about wanting to be able to 'run things so that the system could be changed'. No one talked of a long-term specific purpose. This may also be linked to 'doing the best possible until the possible is no longer best'.
 12. **Mentors:** at key stages mentors (older, more experienced individuals) advised, guided and challenged them.

Appendix 10. Final referral email

From: stephen barden <stephen@stephenbarden.org>

Subject: Final reflections: Dprof

Date: 4 April 2014 13:02:11 CEST

To: [...]

Cc: Coaching Limited Stephen Barden Coaching Limited
<heather@stephenbarden.org>

Dear [...]

Thank you for your patience and your extraordinary help during this doctoral saga of mine. As we discussed way back in the mists of time, the research process called for three stages in which you would be involved:

The interview

Vetting of the themes that emerged from your specific interview

Your reflections and thoughts on my (developing) theory from *all* the interviews.

We are now, thankfully, at the last stage and I would be very grateful if you would have a look at the short narrative attached to enable you to:

Briefly answer the 2-3 questions below

Let me have any short comments, thoughts, and resonance on the theory itself. Do you feel the theory and the themes relate in any way to your own life and learning?

We will be contacting you shortly to arrange whether you would like to reply in writing or by phone. I would very much like – if at all possible – to have your contribution in by mid April so that I can complete the first draft by April 30.

Part of my own approach to this form of qualitative research is that if I am claiming that my theory is constructed from the data provided by you – then it would be extremely foolish of me to ignore your thoughts on that theory. I am well aware that this has resulted in your having given me much more time than is normal in research projects; for which I am extremely grateful.

All my best,

Stephen

14. Can you recall a specific or contextual challenge *early in life* and how you dealt with it? This could have been (for example) the ongoing challenge of the child/young person trying to be heard in or making its mark on the family wanting to do something different to his family or a specific incident (dramatic or not – but personally resonant.) I am looking to understand what drove you to solve problems by 'cloaking yourself in the experience of your staff?'

15. How many of the themes apply strongly to you?

Appendix 11. Ratings of cross themes

²	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	'Innate' or early contextual 'navigation' ³	Pragmatic	3 way challenge	No isolation or Unilateralism	No failure internalised	No blame (fix it – rather than blame)	Acute sense of Reality	Holism: 'the eco- system'	Alert to Constituents	Navigator/ negotiator	Direction Not specific target or ideological purpose	Mentors
A1	5	5	5	4	5	3.5	5	5	5	5	5	5
A2	5	5	4.5 ⁴	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	2
A3	5	5	4	5	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	5
C1	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	3

² 1= weak identification. 5 = strong

³ Not all saw this as 'innate', but certainly something that they saw themselves being (and being seen as) from childhood

⁴ gives herself 5 for challenging self and others. Persistently asks people to challenge but does not get as much as she needs. Hence 4.5

C2	5	5	4	4	3 ⁵	3 ⁶	5	4	5	5 ⁷	5	5
C3	5	5	5 ⁸	5	5	5	5	5	5 ⁹	5	5	5
G1	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	3.5	4	3	5
G2	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
G3	3	5	4	4	5	3	5	5	4	5	3	5
G4	5	5	5 ¹⁰	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Mean	4.7	4.9	4.55	4.5	4.7	4.05	4.8	4.9	4.65	4.9	4.6	4.5

⁵ can sometimes take a long time but learns and moves on.

⁶ as above

⁷ 0 for 'own' negotiation. 5 when negotiating on behalf of the organization.

⁸ but mentioned she had worked for several CEO's who were extremely tough.

⁹ Reference to having 'trustworthy spies' jarred but totally on board regarding alertness to mood.

¹⁰ G4 was initially uncertain as to whether 3, 4 and 9 applied strongly. After further questioning and explanation of terms, he concluded he did strongly identify with them