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From Knowing to Leading: Developing Adaptive Leadership Through Learning by Design

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Abstract

Contemporary design professionals are increasingly required to operate beyond the boundaries of disciplinary expertise, navigating complex organizational environments, competing stakeholder interests, and rapidly changing conditions. This raises a question for design education: how can future professionals be prepared not only to develop vertical expertise, but also to mediate across systems and assume responsibility for strategic decision-making?

This paper explores an experiential pedagogical approach within business-oriented design education. Grounded in a learning-by-design approach, the educational model combines industry-based workshops, multidisciplinary teamwork, iterative experimentation, and venture-oriented activities to expose students to open-ended challenges characterised by uncertainty, competing constraints, and evolving problem definitions.

Rather than treating leadership as a managerial competence acquired at a later stage of professional development, the study conceptualises it as an integrative capability developed through practice. Three interconnected dimensions are proposed: vertical expertise, referring to disciplinary and professional knowledge; systemic mediation, involving the ability to navigate stakeholders, perspectives, and organizational levels; and decision-making agency, referring to the capacity to interpret situations, negotiate trade-offs, and take responsibility for choices.

Drawing on a qualitative analysis of students' process books as evidence of their learning processes, the paper discusses how non-linear, collaborative, and reflective learning experiences can cultivate adaptive leadership capabilities. It argues that design education can prepare future leaders not simply to manage change, but to interpret complexity, connect different levels of action, and lead through informed decision-making.

Keywords: Adaptive Leadership; Experiential Learning; Learning by Design; Strategic Decision-

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Making; Systemic Mediation