

Wellbeing in the workplace: exploring the VUCA approach

Debbie Holley

Bournemouth University, UK

Kate Coulson

University of Northampton, UK

Carina Buckley

Solent University, UK

Erika Corradini

University of Southampton, UK

Presentation abstract

This workshop was aimed at aspiring leaders/leaders/those interested in models of wellbeing and resilience. VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity, a leadership model based on the theories of Bennis and Nanus from the late 1980s (<https://www.vuca-world.org/>). Leaders are often required to navigate uncertainties, paradoxes, conflicts, pressures and ambiguities. The VUCA model calls for new approaches to management centred on a personal approach and is extensively used in intercultural business masterclasses (University of Cambridge; MIT; Jagannath International Management School Kalkaji, India).

The model inspires and encourages leaders to move from the idea of the leader who 'knows all' towards a vision of developmental leadership. This approach clarifies the leader's ability to develop others' capacity to handle problems and make difficult decisions, based on the idea that every individual can contribute their skills. In strategic terms, leading in a VUCA world requires Vision, Understanding, Clarity and Adaptability/Agility. Learning development is starting to embrace this model of leadership, with a new ALDinHE Leadership CoP offering a platform for sharing both theory and practice. The overarching aim of this approach is that of conveying positive energy into the development of meaningful approaches.

The VUCA model relies on six key skills, all of which connect to the values of learning development:

1. Developing a shared purpose.
2. Learning agility.
3. Self-awareness.
4. Leading through collaboration and influence.
5. Confidence in leading through uncertainty.
6. Growth mind-set.

This was a creative discussion-based workshop and we aim to co-create a JLDHE article with interested participants. We have interested participants from the 'International Women's' day workshop we ran, and we wanted to further broaden out this scholarship opportunity to the learning development community. The ALDinHE Leadership CoP are considering how best to feed into notions of a leadership toolkit to support the community. Attendees of the VUCA workshop were asked to read the following two articles prior to the session:

- 'Lessons leaders can learn from those living through change' (HULT Education).
- 'Leading in a VUCA World: five essential skills to learn in a VUCA world' (Culpin, 2018).

Community response

When the session started I wondered if it was really for me. I was at a crossroads with my career and was worried about a potential loss of teaching with a move into management. I was resistant to this but also, I needed to progress and so I was interested to hear more about the VUCA model and what it means for us, in LD.

As we started to discuss the approach I found that the reflections of the presenting team echoed with my own feelings and paralleled aspects of my teaching journey and I began to view progression not as a step away from teaching, but as a means to shape teaching in a different sense. Understanding how to apply teaching skills and strategies in other

contexts is important for learning developers, who often have varied careers in HE and may move into roles in which traditional teaching is less emphasised.

I like the freedom and inclusivity of leadership viewed as 'developmental' and enjoyed hearing about the experiences and challenges faced by others. The honesty was refreshing and empowering and it made me feel less alone with my own worries and doubts. I found that the stories the group shared resonated with me and I enjoyed it when we worked together to articulate features of value and relevance that might help to support others in LD to navigate the challenges of leadership. The opportunity to reflect on leadership skills and practices is vital for learning developers, whose roles are not always seen as leadership positions outside of line management roles, but who employ many leadership strategies in their teaching and interactions with students.

It felt exciting that we, as attendees in the room, could be helping to shape what leadership looks like for LD using VUCA as a launching pad.

Next steps and additional questions

Sessions do not always run according to plan and any advice on how to adapt your content quickly to suit the audience you have is valuable and welcomed. As an ever-emerging discipline which combines an eclectic mix of people from a wide range of different backgrounds it is useful to try to gain consensus grounded on a model as to what leadership looks like in LD and how we might want to shape this for the future. What are the strengths and benefits of us working with a developmental concept of leadership and how can we turn this to our advantage? To what extent does the VUCA model resonate with our aims and objectives as a sector?

Authors' reflection

The session didn't run quite as we'd planned - we were up against the magic-related workshop so we only had six-seven people attend, rendering the idea of more intense group work null. However, we swiftly adapted it into a broader discussion group and it worked really well; certainly, we had plenty of input from all of our attendees.

The original plan was for a well-structured hour:

- Five minutes: overview of VUCA and ice breaking exercise.
- Four x ten minutes facilitated 'snap learning activities' at workstations. Participants will circulate round four workstations in small groups and undertake a short interactive activity for each of: Vision, Understanding, Clarity and Adaptability/Agility.
- Five minutes: conclusions and next steps via a collaborative padlet.

In light of the attendance, our revised plan was much more collaborative and discursive:

- Rearrange the furniture into a large table.
- Twist the PC on the base station so participants could view the prompts, but focus remained on the flip charts on the table.
- Facilitate and scribe, rather than lead the conversations.

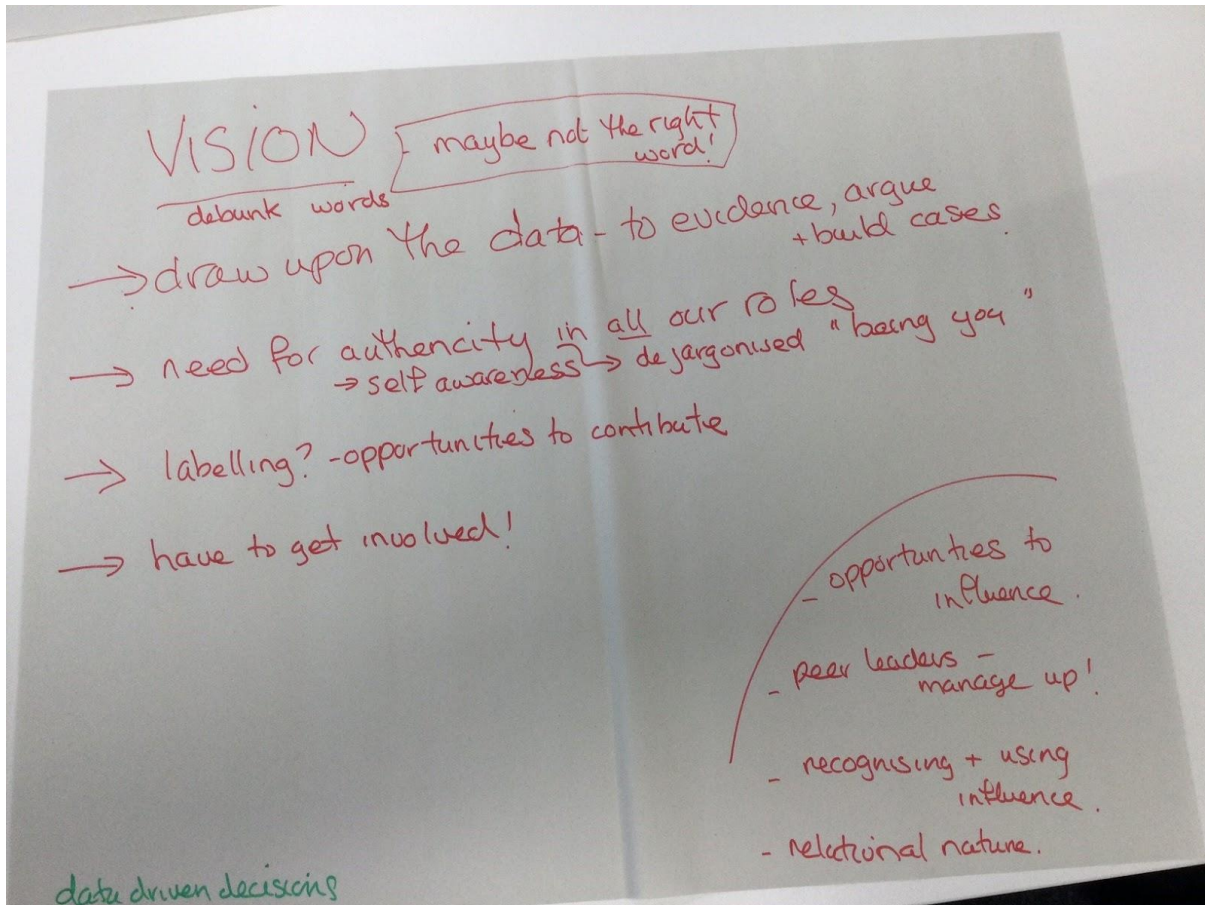
In a way, the session seemed to fit the VUCA ethos – it was Volatile, but we had a Vision for what we wanted to achieve: to work through the four different aspects of the new VUCA model. There was Uncertainty initially, in how we would spend the hour, but we used it instead to come to an Understanding of each other and our roles. Out of the Complexities of our different perspectives and priorities came the Clarity of seeing leadership as a distributed, developmental process, and we rejected the Ambiguity of a disrupted session plan for the Agility that comes from knowing everyone in the room has something valuable to contribute. Having this experience showed us that leadership is not something out of reach, or confined to those in certain hierarchical positions, but is more of a mindset, a set of principles, that anyone can share. It reinforced for us the value of what we were able to achieve, and a need that the relatively new Leadership CoP has already indicated and begun to address.

We now have four huge sheets of paper covered with ideas about how these aspects can be recognised and realised in our LD work, which is hugely valuable to ongoing work amongst us on the nature of leadership in learning development – claiming it as our own. Our intention is to develop these ideas to a point where we have something useful to publish, potentially in the form of a toolkit for other learning developers to adopt. Being

able to hear from delegates about their own experiences has gone a long way towards that, in terms of knowledge but also motivation!

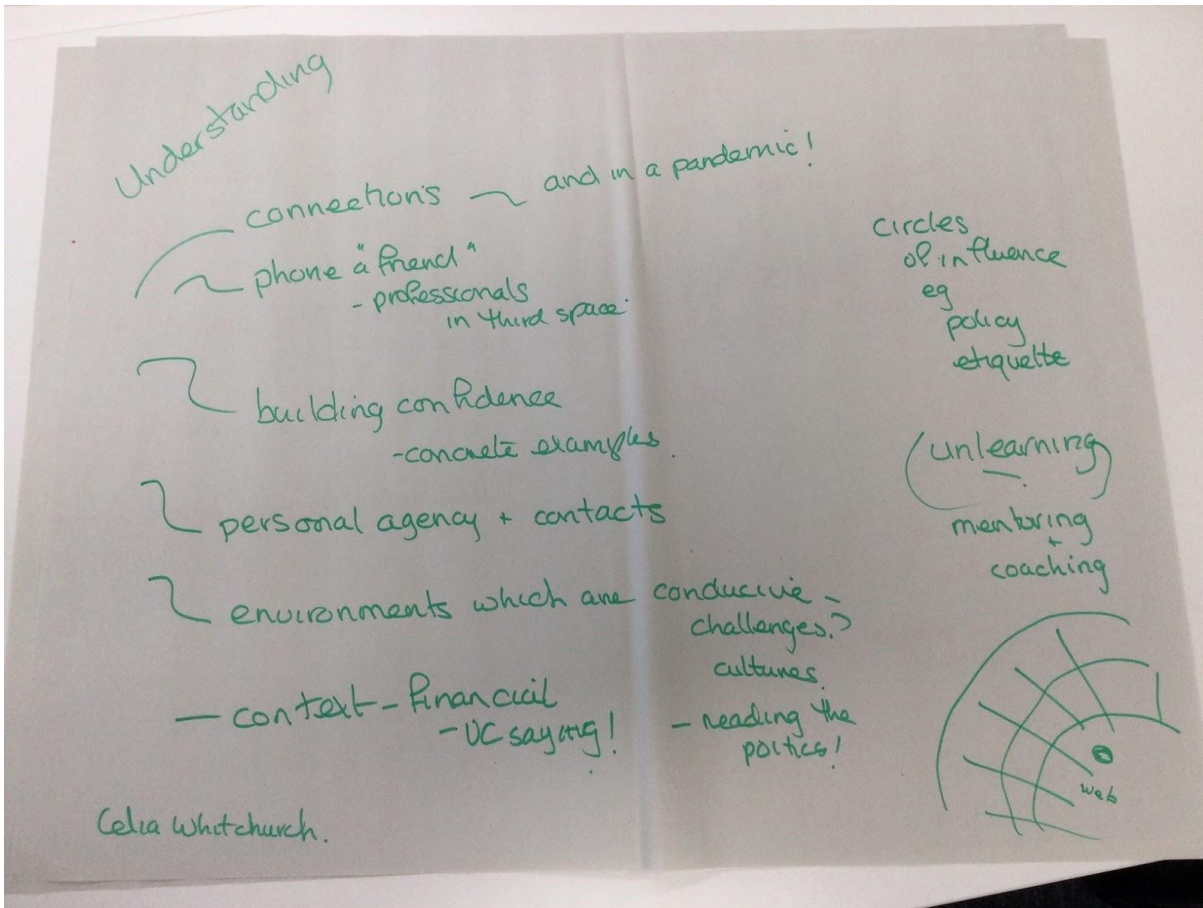
What does the VUCA model mean in practice for learning developers?

Figure 1. Vision.



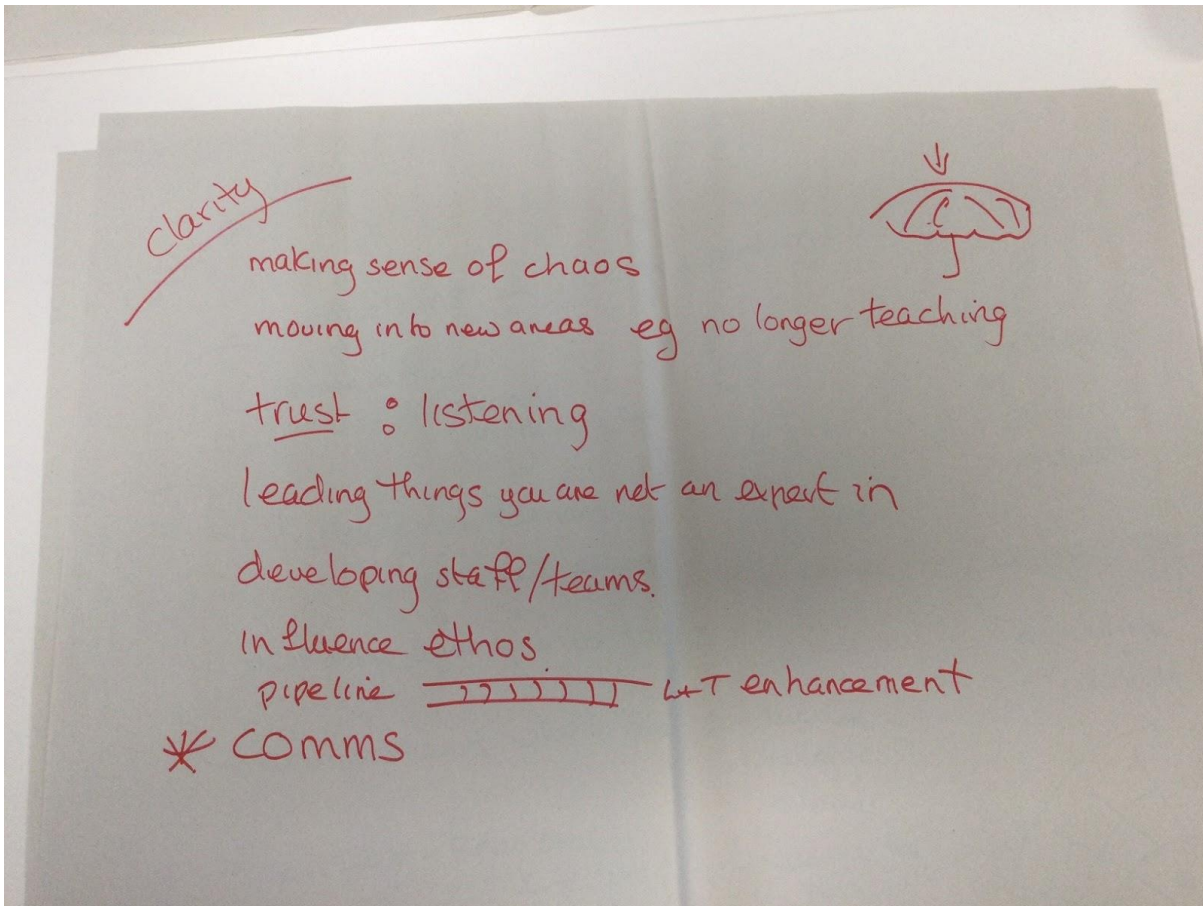
(Figure 1: Image shows delegates responses to the question of how 'Vision' applies to leadership in relation to learning development roles and responsibilities).

Figure 2. Understanding.

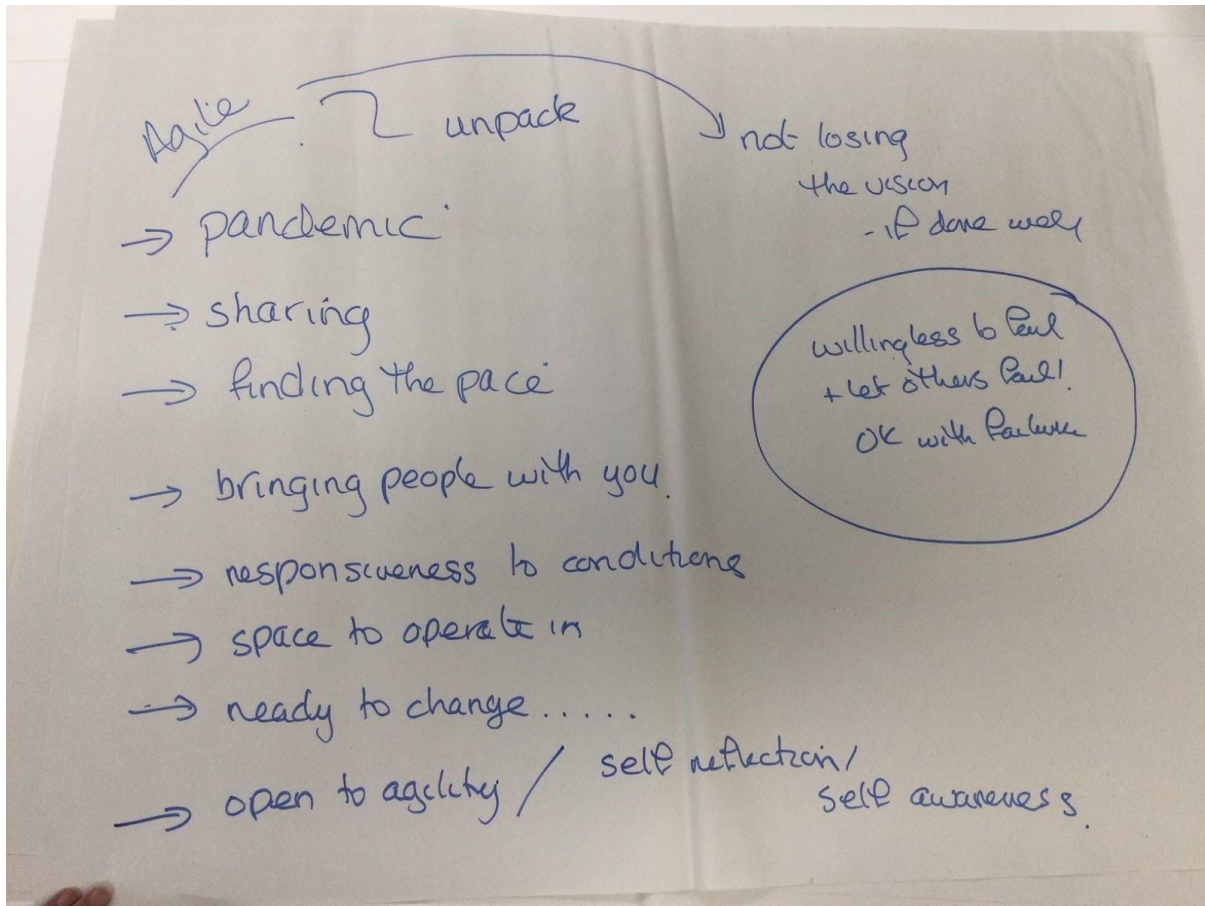


(Figure 2. Image shows delegates responses to the question of how 'Understanding' applies to leadership in relation to learning development roles and responsibilities).

Figure 3. Clarity.



(Figure 3: Image shows delegates responses to the question of how 'Clarity' applies to leadership in relation to learning development roles and responsibilities).

Figure 4. Agility.

(Figure 4: Image shows delegates responses to the question of how 'Agility' and 'being agile' applies to leadership in relation to learning development roles and responsibilities).

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Nicola Grayson from the University of Manchester and Melanie Crisfield from Brunel University London.

References

Culpin, V. (2018) 'Leading in a VUCA world', HULT blog. Available at: <https://www.hult.edu/blog/leading-in-a-vuca-world/> [Accessed: 14 October 2022].

HULT Education, 'Lessons leaders can learn from those living through change'. Available at: <https://www.hult.edu/en/executive-education/insights/learning-to-lead-in-the-21st-century/> (Accessed: 9 September 2022).

Sinha, D. and Sinha, S. (2020) 'Managing in a VUCA world: possibilities and pitfalls', *Journal of Technology Management for Growing Economies*, 11(1), pp.17-21. <https://doi.org/10.15415/jtmge.2020.111003>.

VUCA-WORLD [website]. Available at: <https://www.vuca-world.org/> (Accessed: 15 October 2022).

Further reading

George, B. (2017) 'VUCA 2.0: A strategy for steady leadership in an unsteady world', *Forbes Magazine*, 17 February. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hbsworkingknowledge/2017/02/17/vuca-2-0-a-strategy-for-steady-leadership-in-an-unsteady-world/?sh=6363776d13d8> (Accessed: 9 September 2022).

Author details

Debbie Holley is Professor of Learning Innovation at Bournemouth University. A National Teaching Fellow and a Principal Fellow of AdvanceHE she is a passionate educator, with expertise in learning design and blending learning to motivate and engage a diverse student body. Her research interests in digital, augmented and immersive worlds influence national policy through her published work, keynote addresses and policy articles.

Kate Coulson is currently Head of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at the University of Northampton. She is passionate about the importance of LD advocacy to ensure that our work is understood and valued and has a particular interest in working within the 3rd space and women's leadership within HE. Kate is an Advance HE Senior Fellow and a Certified Leading Practitioner in Learning Development.

Carina Buckley is currently Instructional Design Manager at Solent University, responsible for the on-going development of the VLE as a student-centred, active and inclusive learning space. Her research interests broadly connect to collaboration and community and have evolved recently to explore ideas around leadership and professional identity. She serves as the Treasurer for ALDinHE and also sits on the steering group for the International Consortium of Academic Language and Learning Developers (ICALLD). Following a PhD in Archaeology in 2006, she has since added Advance HE Principal Fellow and Certified Leading Practitioner in Learning Development to her post-nominals.

Erika Corradini is a Principal Teaching Fellow in Academic Practice in the Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP). The remit of her role is to develop education and educators in the HE sector. She is currently Programme Lead for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, a professional development programme aimed at early career academics with teaching responsibilities. Her research activity is largely centred on developing learning and education through evaluating teaching practice and through promoting the scholarship of teaching and learning.