Emergent reciprocal influence: Toward a framework for understanding the distribution of leadership within collaborative school activity.

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A Thing to which people attach many labels with subtly or grossly
different meanings in many different cultures and times is probably not a
Thing at all but many Things (Dahl speaking of power, 1957, p.201 – as

Leadership is such a Thing. Leadership appears to be many Things. It is clear that
scholars of educational leadership lack definitional clarity of the concept of leadership
(Crow & Grogan, 2004; Hodgkinson, 1978; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Rost, 1991). The
definitions we do use, however, seem to constellate around the idea of influence.
Leithwood and Riehl (2003) suggest that “at the core of most definitions of leadership are
two functions: providing direction and exercising influence” (p.2). They go on to suggest:
that leaders work closely with others to develop a shared sense of purpose; that leadership
is very much a relational phenomenon; and that leadership is a function more than it is a
role or position. Educational leadership has also become associated with particular ethical
dispositions. For instance the standards for school leaders developed by the Interstate
School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) state that effective school leaders act as
“moral agents and social advocates for the children and communities they serve” (ISSLC,
1996; p.5). Thus our definitions of leadership also come to be mixed with normative
ideals of what leadership should be.

Leadership is a complex concept with multiple dimensions, forms, and
interpretations. However, despite Leithwood and Riehl’s (2003) recognition that
leadership is not necessarily associated with specific individuals or roles, we still seem to
be enmeshed within a pervasive approach to leadership that focuses upon leaders.
Leithwood and Riehl’s (2003) extensive report on “What we already know…” about school leadership relies on a techno-rationalist functional view of leadership that results in ubiquitous references to *leaders* when talking about leadership. What emerges is a highly teleological conception of leadership that more often than not is tied to the purposive actions of specific individuals. Our definitions of leadership are thus framed by the individual activity of these people we call leaders. Leithwood and Riehl note that they “focus on building-level educational leadership, especially the leadership of those persons who hold formal leadership positions as school principals” (p.2). The justification for this emphasis is the lack of firm empirical and conceptual research on alternative paradigms of leadership.

We take a different approach and choose to explore new areas of leadership conceptualization. Rather than accepting what we know as the state of the art, we suggest that what we know should be a point of departure for the study of what we do not. Leithwood and Riehl mention Kuhn’s (1970) ideas about the development of new paradigms of scientific inquiry; of the acceptance of new truths. Kuhn also describes for us how these new paradigms can develop and take hold quite rapidly, in a process akin to punctuated equilibrium in evolutionary theory. Kuhn’s lesson is not that alternative paradigms emerge through the gradual accumulation of new knowledge that eventually overwhmels that which was known before, but rather that status quo knowledge reaches a point where it is susceptible to being overtaken by new ideas. Extant theories and concepts become fatigued. Conditions become ripe for new ideas, many of which have typically been lurking for a while, to take center stage and seize a great deal of attention. These alternative paradigms have not necessarily won a certain status based upon the
weight of the evidence. Instead, they offer new ways of looking at things at a time when the old ways just don’t seem to fit as well as they used to. At the very least, status quo perspectives come to be seen as inadequate for capturing and explaining the full range of phenomena under study. Shifts in policy and social behavior can help trigger such moments of theoretical metamorphosis for social scientists. In these cases, actual changes in the social environment stimulate the need for new explanatory tools. The old perspectives just don’t fit the landscape like they used to. All of these conditions of a paradigm shift appear to be true today when one looks at the field of educational leadership. For years, voices from domains of both practice and research have been lamenting the inadequacy of extant theories to encompass the range of leadership phenomena present in educational settings. At the same time the idealized organizational landscape of schools has dramatically shifted from one of rigid hierarchy to one of shared-governance and collaborative interaction. Recognizing these changes, we strive to move on from what we already know to new areas requiring further investigation.

Specifically, we offer an extensive review of the evolving paradigm of distributed leadership. This leadership perspective is not new, but has drawn considerable attention in recent years. Distributed leadership offers the promise of seeing leadership in new ways that both take into account the idea of leaders and followers, but also the concept of emergent leadership that is not tied to the action of specific individuals, but rather to collaborative groups. Our exploration of distributed leadership has also led to a qualitative case study (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, under review; Watson, 2005) designed to test our ideas of the connections between leadership and collaborative interaction. We briefly review the findings of this study, and then offer a synthesis
framework based upon our research of both the literature of distributed leadership and the practice of collaborating teachers. Before beginning our review of distributed leadership we offer further rationale for questioning our status quo conceptions of leadership.

Leadership as a Family Resemblance Concept

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1953) idea of family resemblance concepts rests on the principle that there are some categories of phenomena that include discrete instances which may have no single attribute in common. What this means is that there is no one unifying characteristic that we can point to as the “essence” of some abstract ideas; such as leadership. Leithwood and Riehl (2003, p.2) suggested above that “providing direction and exercising influence” is common to most definitions of leadership. This claim must be tested as a necessary condition for the identification of leadership before we can accept it as a general conceptual maxim. According to Braumoeller and Goertz (2000) the ideal procedure for such a test is to document instances of leadership in which these criteria are absent; such disconfirming evidence would bring the claim into question. Furthermore we must consider the import of the words providing and exercising. These verbs connotate a specific manifestation of both direction and influence in relationship to human agency. Specifically, direction and influence are cast as the objects of purposive action, grounded in acts of individual agency. As we shall discuss, agency can take both individual and collective forms. One of our primary objectives in this paper is to bring greater resolution to the structural and social processes that frame agency, particularly agency of the collective variety. Additionally, we aim to provide a framework which can be used to test the rationalist teleological premise which under girds so much of both past and contemporary leadership theory.
We suggest that close attention to the interactional processes of the social activity of teacher collaboration has revealed dimensions of how a particular form of leadership, conceived as *emergent reciprocal influence*, develops within organizations. This conclusion is connected to our empirical case study of the conversational interaction of teachers on two professional learning teams, and tied to our close reading of the work of Peter Gronn (i.e. 2000). This relational understanding of leadership is closely linked to the paradigm of distributed leadership which is still in its very early stages of conceptual development (Bennet, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003; Spillane, 2005).

Distributed leadership stands in contrast to the leader-centric models of leadership we have typically embraced in the West. In the past we have created an impressionistic image of leadership. It is an historical construct; one of which we assume we know the meaning. These traditions are rooted in our social heritage of hero worship and individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Yukl, 1999), yet also have strong connections to some of the founding research in leadership studies from the 1940’s and 1950’s. In work associated with the Ohio State Leadership studies scholars created a link between leadership and the behavior of people in formal positions that has been extremely resilient to modification.

Hemphill (1952) proposed that leadership be defined in relationship to *leadership acts*, saying that leaders are identified based upon how often they “initiate a structure in the interaction of others as part of the process of solving a mutual problem” (p.15). This idea is actually quite consistent with Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond’s (2004) focus upon the *activity* of school leadership (thus legitimating a greater connection of this and other “alternative” perspectives on leadership to the bulk of literature that supports “what
we already know”). The Ohio State study, however, was confounded by the fact that its sample of “leaders” was skewed to military personnel holding specific offices (Shartle & Stogdill, 1952). These were the subjects whose leadership acts were being studied; therefore the behavior of these positional figures within a rigid hierarchical organization – based upon obedient compliance to superiors – became a classic point of reference for understanding the acts of leaders. A largely unquestioned assumption about who leaders are, led to empirical work that served to reinforce this assumption. Researchers went time and again to similar samples of individuals in order to study leaders.

Our historic struggle with specifying the concept of leadership stems from this long-standing “familiarity” with the concept, with our comfort level in using the term casually and assuming common understandings of what it means – understanding that seem to invariably drift towards roles, positions, and individuals. A postmodern perspective suggests that these conceptual comfort zones warrant some disruption. As Crow and Grogan (2004) have written,

The theories used in the traditional narratives of leadership thought are based on causal relationships, views of a single reality, and other features of positivism that have been critiqued in regard to their value for understanding leadership in a postmodern world. Educational leadership in a postmodern world, where there are multiple realities, shifting perspectives, a rejection of absolute cause-effect relationships, and a broadening of inquiry methods beyond the scientific, technical, and rational, calls into question the confident, seemingly coherent narrative of leadership we have inherited.

This paper supports a perspective on leadership that is informed by a rich historical tradition of leadership research (“what we already know”), as well as so-called alternative perspectives. Our thesis is also grounded in recent empirical data; subject to ongoing analysis. Our objective is to look back at what we already know, assess what we
do not, study the practice we seek to explain, and offer a framework that synthesizes this information as a guide to further research that can stretch the bounds of our knowledge of leadership in new directions.

Based upon our review of the literature, and our own empirical research (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, under review; Watson, 2005), we conceptualize leadership as both the process and product of social interaction which influences purposive human activity. Leadership is thus constitutive of, and constituted by, the social milieu. Leadership represents an expression of conjoint agency (Gronn, 2000), or “the satisfactory completion of discretionary tasks… attributable to the concertive labour performed by pluralities of interdependent organization members” (p.318). Leadership can not occur in a social vacuum. A leader is someone who may initiate, perpetuate, sometimes guide, or finalize social interaction reflecting and resulting in purposive activity. However our focus, in contrast to prevailing leadership studies (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), is upon leadership rather than leaders. A traditional focus on individuals as leaders has resulted in an imbalance in our perspectives of leadership. We do not suggest that existing conceptions of leadership are inaccurate, but rather that they have failed to adequately incorporate a view of leadership as an emergent group phenomenon that can indeed exist independently of individuals we would refer to as leaders. Leadership can be conceived of as a leaderless collaborative phenomenon.

Since leadership is multi-faceted, interactional, and process-oriented it must be regarded in both essentialist and consequentialist terms. Leadership is essentialist because it is necessarily an interactive social process – that is its essence. This is echoed in Leithwood and Riehl’s (2003) observation that leadership is always embedded in social
relationships. We must also view leadership from a consequentialist perspective because without the product of the process – the structures or objects – then leadership has not taken place. These outcomes are what we traditionally use to recognize leadership. Metaphysically, leadership is a dyadic conceptual definition; it is both process and product. Our conceptual framework, synthesized from decades of research and theorizing on leadership as an organizational quality and as a relational phenomenon, offers a model in which leadership is the central process of *enstructuration*; the process through which agency impacts structure. Leadership is an element of an activity system mediated by both emergent and designed artifacts. The structures resulting from this process of mediated interaction create a context of *structuration* which shapes further agency and enstructuration. Thus a feedback loop is created between the poles of agency and structure with leadership as part of the active process residing in their midst.

The Centrality of Interaction

Researchers tend to get rather muddled when they try to pin *leadership* down conceptually. It is easy to become lost in the sea of family resemblances that frame our understanding of this concept. Leadership is a classic example of an abstract social construct that is fundamental to our ideas of living together, yet rests on nothing tangible. As Rost (1991) suggests,

> Leadership scholars are dealing with socially constructed reality, which cannot be seen or touched, only inferred through the actions of human beings (p.14).

In order to understand the dimensions of this complex concept better, we must seek to understand the dynamics of human interaction in more complex ways. We must seek to grasp the constituting power of social interaction on the micro level that is necessary to
document leadership as it emerges. This will allow us to come closer to understanding the necessary and sufficient conditions for the presence of leadership, and thus generate more valid conceptual definitions of the phenomenon.

Our tendency is to look at what we think we can understand; namely formal offices and structures – seemingly static entities that speak to their own function in overly simplistic ways. The illusory clarity of socially constituted concepts like position and structure veils the fundamental interaction that gives these concepts their meaning in the first place. As we shall see, the idea of leadership as a group phenomenon and as a relational concept is not new (Cartwright, 1965; Thompson, 1967). The persuasive force of the known, however, has maintained a positional, individual, and techno-rational view of leadership that still dominates our scholarly discourse today (i.e. Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). It is the reified standard against which other conceptions of leadership must defend themselves and jockey for position.

We must challenge ourselves to find new common understandings of leadership by looking in those places which are more difficult and less obvious to probe, which are conceptually ambiguous, and which call for unconventional methods of analysis. These places are the loci for dramatically different perspectives on leadership, perspectives that will open up new avenues for grasping the nature of human behavior in organizations. Investigations of this new frontier are critical to developing more complex approaches to improving our schools. After reviewing the literature on distributed leadership and summarizing our own previous empirical work, we offer a new conceptual framework for interpreting leadership activity as an interactional phenomenon.
Distributed Leadership: A Developing Perspective

Discussion of leadership as a distributive phenomenon has taken place for some time, but has intensified and become much more influential over the past decade. What may be the very first reference to distributed leadership appears in a book chapter contributed by the Australian scholar C. A. Gibb (1954) to the Handbook of Social Psychology. Gronn (2002b) revived Gibb’s ideas in his own influential work. Ogawa and Bossert (1995) included work by Barnard (1960), Thompson (1967), Cartwright (1965), and Katz and Kahn (1966) as early precursors to a distributed view of leadership within organizations. Smylie, Conley, and Marks (2002) recognized some of these same contributions in their brief review of models of distributive leadership. Bennett’s (2003) extensive review of literature on distributed leadership has focused on more recent work, yet also retreads the early pathways that have led to the point of our contemporary discussion of these concepts. What becomes abundantly clear from all of this work is that our conceptual understanding of distributed leadership is still in its infancy, but that the idea is not necessarily new.

A review by Nigel Bennett (2003) for the National College of School Leadership in the U.K. appears to be the most comprehensive discussion of the range of perspectives on distributed leadership to date. Bennett identified three distinct elements of the distributed leadership perspective. First, the perspective regards leadership as an emergent property associated with groups or networks of individuals who interact. Second, distributed leadership implies that the boundaries of leadership are permeable. Third, distributed leadership suggests that different skill sets or expert knowledge are spread across organizations, rather than residing in a few individuals. According to
Bennett’s review, critical variables that influence distributed leadership include: control/autonomy; organizational structure and agency; social and cultural context; source(s) of change; positional/informal leadership; dynamics of team working; institutional and spontaneous forms of distributed leadership; and conflict resolution. Bennett identifies Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001b) and Gronn (2000) as offering the two most robust conceptual treatments of distributed leadership to date. The review concludes with a call for further conceptual refinement of the lens, as well as empirical application.

In their review of new approaches to teacher leadership Smylie, Conley, and Marks (2002) included a limited discussion of perspectives that they labeled as models of distributive leadership. These models approach leadership “exercised not only by people in formal positions but also by people outside those positions” and aim to “shift our attention… toward organizational and task-oriented conceptions of leadership (p.172).” The three different models the authors focus upon are based in the work of Firestone (1996) and Heller and Firestone (1995), Ogawa and Bossert (1995), and Spillane and his colleagues (2001), respectively. The literature associated with each of these perspectives is addressed below, following a review of some antecedent work on these ideas from the 1950’s and 1960’s.

**Origins**

References to the distribution of leadership, or leadership that transcends formal hierarchies, appear to have begun in the 1950’s and 1960’s among social psychologists and scholars of business management and organizational studies. These works do not all necessarily use the precise term *distributed leadership*, but deal with thematic issues
related to organizations that are consistent with contemporary discussions of distributed leadership. A brief review of some of this work reveals that many of the issues we now discuss as “new” perspectives on organizations and leadership have actually been under consideration for some time.

As mentioned above, Gibb’s (1954) reference to distributed leadership may be the first. According to Gibb,

Leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group. This concept of “distributed leadership” is an important one. If there are leadership functions which must be performed in any group, and if these functions may be “focused” or “distributed,” then the leaders will be identifiable both in terms of the frequency and in terms of the multiplicity or pattern of functions performed. Such a precursory conception appears to accord well with the needs of contemporary research in this area (p.884).

Gibb acknowledges a range of leadership forms, from leadership that is focused in particular positions or in specific individuals, to distributed leadership that is manifest in the functions performed by a plurality of individuals. Gibb is critical of the over-emphasis on focused leadership that was pervasive at the time he was writing, yet draws upon contemporary literature from the 1950’s that was reifying positional leadership at the same time he was calling for research on the relational qualities of leadership.

Gibb (1954) summed up the variety of frames for viewing leadership as: 1) leadership as unitary trait, as a quality that will be characteristic of all leaders everywhere; 2) leadership according to a constellation of traits theory, which accords that “in each leader there can be recognized a pattern of traits which constitute his leadership capacity” (p.914); and 3) interactional theory. He asserts that this latter perspective conceives of leadership as “an interactional phenomenon arising when group formation takes place.” Recognizing distributed leadership is an important step towards an
interactional theory of leadership. Gibb identified a number of critical dimensions of an incipient interactional theory: “leadership is always relative to the situation”; “the basic psychology of the leadership process is that of social interaction”; “election to leader status depends upon perception of individual differences” (p.915). Gibb was still wedded to the idea of differentiation, that a leader possesses a quality or constellation of qualities setting them apart from followers. This binary construct is difficult to escape, as we can still see in the work of Spillane and colleagues (see below).

Some years later Barnard (1960) drew attention to the importance of cooperative systems within organizations and of the need for managers to understand how these systems function.

The processes of interaction must be discovered or invented, just as a physical operation must be discovered or invented… the interaction changes the motives and interest of those participating in the cooperation (p.60).

Barnard used the word cooperation similarly to the way we use the term collaboration today. He expressed an awareness of the emergent and improvisational nature of social interaction within organizations, and that these processes were important for managers to understand. The relationship of leadership to these processes hinges upon the morality of organizational actors much more than the positions they happen to hold. Since action is a process of cooperative forces, of social interaction, and contingent upon the morality of individual actors, leadership becomes connected to personal agency more than it does to formal hierarchies. The manifestation of moral agency becomes the source of the distribution of leadership through the processes of cooperation. Differing perspectives on agency was also a key element of Cartwright’s (1965) discussions of organizations and member influences on one another.
Cartwright (1965) examined the process of social influence, taking as an assumption that many people in organizations have influence over one another. Influence is not limited to specific people or positions. He identified three major dimensions of the influence process: 1) an agent exerting influence; 2) the method(s) of exerting influence; and 3) the agent subjected to influence. Cartwright posited that the interaction of these dimensions was rooted in the processes of social interaction. He reflected upon classical views of organizations that have viewed agency primarily in terms of the acts of individuals or the functions fulfilled by certain roles or positions, suggesting that this view was based on power being related to access to valued specific resources. Cartwright identified the work of Dahl (1961) on the sources of power of elite social groups as strongly connected to this perspective on influence. He viewed Dahl’s work as constituting a bridge between the classic individual perspective of agency with more progressive views rooted in social interaction. He noted that some theorists allowed for an agent to be represented by a group. Cartwright believed that “above all, influence is a social relationship” (1965, p.40). He was critical of the focus on studying leaders and studying followers but not the relationship between the two, claiming that the latter is really what we are interested in and need to understand.

Katz and Kahn (1966) also placed great emphasis on a broadly conceived perspective of influence in their work on the social psychology of organizations. They defined leadership “as the exertion of influence on organizationally relevant matters by any member of the organization” (p.332). They went on to add that they had observed that organizations with cultures in which influential acts are widely shared tend to be highly effective. They referred to this as the distribution of leadership. Katz and Kahn
claimed that in such organizations people are more likely to possess a greater commitment to decisions that have been made, because they have had some part in them, and that the quality of decisions is likely to improve. This idea exists today as a central tenet of the professional learning community concept. A broad taxonomy of forms of distributed leadership is described. Katz and Kahn discriminate between “delegation, participative decision-making, accessibility to influence, and communication of organizationally relevant information” (p.332). The authors warn, however, against distributing leadership functions too liberally. They assert that the primary mechanism of the modern organization is the division of labor and that it would be inefficient to abandon this in favor of equity in all areas of decision making and access to resources. Nonetheless, they conclude that “the broad sharing of leadership functions contributes to organizational effectiveness under almost all circumstances” (p.335).

Thompson’s (1967) work figures prominently in Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond’s (2004) distributed perspective of leadership (see below). Thompson was committed to exploring the sociological bases of administrative and organizational theories of action. He developed a particularly strong conceptual perspective on the idea of interdependencies. Thompson suggested that three types of interdependent relationships can exist between parts, or members, of an organization: pooled; sequential; and reciprocal.

Thompson (1967) defined pooled interdependence as a situation when organizational members perform different tasks that are all necessary to the successful completion of a common goal. Sequential interdependence occurs when the actions of one part of an organization are contingent upon the completion of a task by a different
part of the organization. Reciprocal interdependence takes place when the outputs of one member or part of an organization become inputs or resources for another. Thompson noted that elements of each form filtered throughout each other form. He added that “In the order introduced, the three types of interdependence are increasingly difficult to coordinate because they contain increasing degrees of contingency” (p.56). As one moves up the ladder in complexity from pooled to reciprocal interdependence the activities of each element of an organization become more reliant upon the performance of other parts of the organization.

*Contemporary Models*

Smylie, Conley, and Marks (2002) identified three general models of approaching distributed leadership differentiated primarily on the basis of how leadership is conceptualized. In their review of recent trends in the research of teacher leadership these authors noted that the mid-1990’s witnessed a renewal of conceptions of networked leadership that first emerged in research from the 1950’s and 1960’s (i.e. Barnard, 1968; Thompson, 1967 – cited in Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002 and discussed immediately above). This earlier work emphasized looking at what school personnel do, more than who is doing it. This challenged prevailing conventions of associating leadership with particular positions. Over the past decade a number of scholars of leadership (Firestone, 1996; Ogawa & Bossert; 1995; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001) have been attempting to unravel the activities which constitute leadership action, and the complex network of organizational relationships which characterize the manifestation of leadership. Empirical studies of the last several years have contributed to an elaboration
of the distributed perspective on leadership. A surprisingly small number of conceptual works seem to have stimulated this surge of interest in distributed leadership.

Firestone (1996) developed a functionalist model in which leadership was associated with important tasks and functions. Focus was removed from positions and specific people and placed instead upon the performance of these activities. This perspective can sometimes be misconstrued as suggesting that distributed leadership is simply the recognition that multiple persons in schools have responsibility for leadership functions, or what Spillane (2005) refers to as “leader plus”. What this functionalist model actually communicates to us, however, is that leadership is not intrinsically tied to specific positions, but rather to specific activities that function to facilitate the attainment of organizational goals. The message is that those seeking to study leadership should look for the performance of these key activities instead of assuming that watching the principal will automatically grant a window upon the enactment of leadership.

Around the same time, another group of scholars (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995) developed an organizational resource model of distributed leadership. From this perspective leadership is associated with the interaction of individuals within an organization and the subsequent multidirectional flow of influence that results. Rather than being a task-oriented, functional phenomenon leadership is viewed as a relational construct precipitated by the contact of organizational members across networked roles. Leadership can thus be viewed in terms of the degree of social influence possessed by individuals, groups of individuals, or the entire organization. Pounder, Ogawa, and Adams (1995) successfully associated the aggregate leadership influence in schools with a number of organizational outcomes. Furthermore
they were able to link the leadership influence of different organizational roles with particular organizational outcomes.

Although roles are still a major element of this perspective, the concept of interaction emerges as the central focus.

Focus shifts from people’s isolated actions to their social interactions. The interact, not the act, becomes the basic building block of organizational leadership. Interaction is the medium through which resources are deployed and influence is exerted. And because leadership affects organizational structure, it affects the interactions of individuals in organizations. In essence, leadership through interactions influences the system of interactions that constitute an organization (Ogawa & Bossert, p.236).

An essential corollary to this recognition is that “the interactive nature of leadership means that leadership is reciprocal” (p.237). This work represents a critical transitional step toward a more radical conception of leadership as a relational phenomenon. Looking at the relationship between the actions of individuals in various roles and other members of an organization allows us to see that leadership is contingent upon interaction – even for individuals holding specific positions or roles that carry a leadership expectation. The next step is to escape the ideas of roles, positions, and status differentiation altogether, in other words to conceptualize and study leadership in leaderless contexts. It is essential to escape the assumption that specific roles, and functions traditionally associated with those roles, are a necessary condition for the activity of leadership. This assumption continues to distract us from the seeing the significance of interaction to leadership.

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond’s (2001; 2004) model of distributed leadership integrates several of the ideas of the other models discussed above. This perspective associates leadership with activity. These scholars argue that to understand how school leadership works we should use activity associated with leadership tasks as our unit of
analysis for research, rather than leaders themselves or leader behavior. They suggest that this activity, or leadership practice, “is distributed over leaders, followers, and the school’s situation or context” (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; p.11). Borrowing from distributed cognition and activity theory, this model locates leadership activity within a networked web of individuals, artifacts, and situations. As noted earlier they also import Thompson’s (1967) concepts of pooled, sequential, and reciprocal interdependency as a means of classifying the variety of networked relationships that can be manifest in organizations.

From this conceptual vantage point the challenge for researchers is to reveal links between the broad functions and specific tasks of school leadership (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Distinguishing between a school’s espoused theories of practice and the actual theories in practice that frame daily operations is identified as a critical step in unlocking these function/task relationships. This perspective recognizes the key role that individual discretion can play in task enactment by individual organization members (Lipsky, 1980). The role of interaction in this model also necessitates examining the interdependencies between activities. Noting the presence of pooled, sequential, or reciprocal interdependencies is recommended as a tool for tracking the distributive quality of leadership activity. In order to understand school leadership it is necessary to identify the relationship between each step in the enactment of tasks that support leadership functions.

In addition to this social, or relational, distribution it is also important to grasp the situational distribution of leadership practice. “Situation or context does not simply ‘affect’ what school leaders do as some sort of independent or interdependent variable(s):
it is *constitutive* of leadership practice” (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; p.20-21). Artifacts, or tools, such as administrative and instructional documents and policies serve as externalized representations of ideas and intentions that are constitutive of leadership. Once in place they can also serve as mediating constraints. Similarly, organizational structure can both constitute and filter leadership practice.

Spillane (2005) says that “distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures.” This “practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation” (p.144). Thus Spillane identifies what he calls the three productive elements of leadership practice: leaders, followers, and situation.

Elsewhere, however (as is noted above), Spillane and his colleagues have marked individuals, artifacts, and situation as the constituting forces of leadership practice. In both formulae it is the interaction of the three factors that is given constitutive force. This inconsistency in identifying these dimensions is curious. Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) make it clear that artifacts serve a mediational function between individuals and situation. However Spillane (2005) appears to suggest that the dyadic interaction of leaders and followers is constituted by the dimension of situation. Now, of course, there is room for artifacts to mediate the leader/follower interaction, but the use of artifacts as a link between individuals and situation is not as explicit. Spillane and his colleagues have received some criticism for their continued reliance upon the leader/follower distinction with their model (J. Sherer – personal communication, April 2005). It is interesting that given this critique Spillane appears to be emphasizing role differentiation more, rather than less. This seems incongruous given his explicit assertion
that a distributed perspective of leadership is about interaction, and not about roles. Spillane’s (2005, forthcoming) new book on distributed leadership will hopefully clarify this apparent evolution of his conceptualization of the lens.

Recent Research

Recent research in distributed leadership has been strongly influenced by this model developed by Spillane and his colleagues. A “Spillane School” of researchers, in effect, emerged. Recurrent symposia showcasing much of this research have been held at the conferences of both the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA). Both Gronn (2002a) and Spillane, et al (in press) have contributed chapters on the distributed leadership lens to recent edited books. Spillane (2003) has also served as the editor of a special issue of *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* that showcased research influenced by the distributed leadership paradigm. Selections of work from this special issue, as well as from other publications and conference papers are highlighted below in order to demonstrate the range of work currently being conducted using the lens of distributed leadership.

Spillane, Diamond, Walker, Halverson, and Jita (2001a) conducted a qualitative study that examined resource allocation in Chicago elementary schools, highlighting how the leadership in one school effectively identified and activated resources for improving science instruction. The authors drew results from a longitudinal study of 13 Chicago elementary schools. The authors focused most specifically on the distribution of resources across subject areas and used a social capital perspective to identify sources of variation in this distribution.
Sebring, Hallman, and Smylie (2001) studied Chicago public schools as well, as part of the ongoing work of the Consortium on Chicago School Research. In this mixed-method study the authors looked at factors that caused organizational retreat from efforts that had once promoted distributed leadership. Three Chicago elementary schools were used as case studies. External pressures associated with high-stakes testing were found to be the primary cause of principals stepping back from teacher empowerment and seizing more direct control of school operations, although one case study school demonstrated the capacity to accommodate these new pressures into the distributed structural forms that the school had adopted.

Halverson and Clifford (2004) focused on the role that local situation plays in mediating policy implementation – in this case, specifically the implementation of a new teacher evaluation policy - in a small suburban Midwestern school district. This qualitative case study found that the situation of practice is constituted by more than mere physical context. It is also formed by routines and traditions shaped by situation to create a sort of cognitive inertia that frames actors interpretations of new situations. Halverson and Clifford’s work is strongly influenced by theories of distributed cognition and tries to gain a deeper understanding of how both situation and artifacts interact with individuals to frame their work experiences. The authors connected these insights to school leadership by observing the interactions of principals and teachers throughout the evaluation process.

Wassink, Sleegers, and Imants (2004) also examined the influence of situation, but in the setting of Dutch public schools. This study applied the lens of distributed leadership within a more conventional leadership framework, that of looking directly at a
principal’s actions and decision-making. This multiple-case study inquiry took place in Dutch secondary schools. The authors applied Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond’s (2001) framework to look at the situated practice of the formal school leader within the broader networked relations that framed leadership practice in the schools. They concluded that both the interaction of the cognitive and social components of the principal’s vision, and the interaction of this vision with the social and structural environment, is a critical factor in determining a school leader’s capacity for influence.

Camburn, Rowan, and Taylor (2004) did a quantitative analysis of how schools that have adopted Comprehensive School Reform models both configure and activate school leadership through the definition of formal roles. To do this the authors surveyed principals from a national sample of schools using three of the most popular CSR models: the Accelerated Schools Project; America’s Choice, and Success for All. The authors concluded that the CSR models appear to influence the performance of leadership functions. It was found that principals in these schools were likely to offer significant amounts of instructional leadership. It is interesting to note that the leadership being measured is the functional behavior of the principals.

In a mixed-method study based upon much of the same data, Barnes, Camburn, Kim, and Rowan (2004) attempted to probe the connection of leadership practice (of principals) in supporting improved instruction. This was done by looking at the interactions of school leaders and teachers. Interviews were conducted with leaders and teachers at case study sites to gather this data. Anecdotally, one finding of this study was that all case study sites reported using instructional work groups at the time of data collection. The study concluded that two leadership functions, developing teacher
capacity and monitoring instruction, were distributed across the systems of the case study sites. They moderated Camburn et al.’s (2004) conclusions by indicating that the adoption of new leadership roles was often tainted by a degree of “caution and ambivalence” (p.38).

Goldstein (2003) conducted a mixed-method case study of a large urban school district to examine the effects of trying to develop leadership roles among teachers through the implementation of a new teacher evaluation program. The program, called Peer Assistance and Review, called for teachers to become active members of the evaluation process. Goldstein found that even though a cross-section of participants felt favorably about the program, that most still expressed a desire for the principal to take a more active role in the evaluation process. Thus, an attempt at fostering distributed was being met with yearnings for more, not less, bureaucratic structure.

Copland (2003) employs a lens of distributed leadership derivative of the general school reform and improvement philosophy discussed by Elmore (2000). His longitudinal study of a region-wide school renewal effort called the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative used mixed-methods to look at the foundations of building and sustaining capacity for school improvement. Copland found that the use of an inquiry process buttressed by distributed site-level leadership contributed to schools’ ability to create and maintain reform initiatives. The process and the situation interacted to influence reculturing.

Mangin (2005) has looked at distributed leadership from the perspective of teacher leaders in a comparative case study of teachers and teacher leaders in five different school districts in New Jersey. Mangin differentiates teacher leaders from
teachers based upon the roles they hold and functions they perform. Teacher leaders were specially designated “coaches” for other teachers’ development of improved instruction. The author found that teacher receptiveness to working with the teacher leaders was conditional upon the perceived value of the activity, and the specific help that was being provided.

A striking characteristic of every one of these nine pieces of recent research is that they all focus primarily on individuals that fill certain roles or positions, people we would casually identify as leaders. Each piece of research uses some form of a lens of distributed leadership, but all follow the tradition of differentiating between leaders and followers, and all associate leadership with these “leaders” who fill specific roles. Some cases involve people assuming new roles, but without variation the leaders are personnel who perform acts associated with designated leadership positions.

If we are really trying to find new forms of leadership, then why do we keep looking in all the places we have already peered into for the development of past paradigms that we have become dissatisfied with? We contend that the ascriptive role-based differentiation of the professional identities of organizational members as either a leader or a follower can at times filter our ability to see non-hierarchical forms of influence behavior – namely distributed leadership as opposed to focused leadership. It appears that much of the research noted above is studying the reshuffling of bureaucratic tasks, or delegation. If leadership is truly relational, then there should be dimensions of leadership that are not found in the hierarchy, but rather among the undifferentiated masses – the proletarian forms of leadership, if you will. Following a discussion of Gronn’s model of distributed leadership, we talk about our own research and offer a
synthesis framework developed with the goal of being able to analyze non-hierarchical forms of leadership.

_Gronn’s Model_

The work of Australian scholar Peter Gronn (2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003) on distributed leadership has already been noted. Gronn’s research offers a sophisticated treatment of the perspective that warrants detailed review. To date however, there is a dearth of empirical research incorporating Gronn’s model of distributed leadership. Bennet, et al’s (2003) review of literature related to distributed leadership appropriately identifies Gronn as having put forth the most conceptually well-developed framework to date. For American audiences, however, Gronn’s work is still under-recognized. His writings under gird much of the perspective articulated by the influential work of Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001, 2004). However, where Spillane and his colleagues rely heavily on contingency theory, drawing off Thompson (1967), and concepts of distributed cognition, Gronn turns to activity theory (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). Gronn’s efforts have been extensive, and deserve an extended discussion. Gronn’s work is discussed as a precursor to the presentation of our own synthesis of concepts associated with distributed leadership; a synthesis leading to an analytical framework for studying emergent reciprocal influence within organizations.

Gronn (2000) suggests that leadership researchers have created a polarized debate that persistently errs in either privileging agency or structure. He identifies this as a false ontological dualism. Gronn claims that there has been a,
managerial leadership, a vigorous reassertion of systemic properties and role structures, but devoid (virtually) of any identifiable sense of agency. (p.317).

Gronn uses activity theory as a means to bridge the gap between the poles of this dualistic approach to leadership, to come to view forms of leadership along a continuum rather than in binary opposition to one another. I discuss activity theory in more detail below.

What influences Gronn the most from this perspective is the focus on activity as a dimension of reality that spans agency and structure; that links them together. He says that the analysis of contextually-bound activities “permits an understanding of agential-structural relations through the process of structuring” (p.317). Structuring is the process through which agency influences structure. These structuring actions may either reproduce or transform existing sets of institutional relations. As will be seen in our framework, we turn this term around somewhat and attempt to account for both the processes of agency influencing structure and vice versa.

Activity theory takes collectively performed activity as its unit of analysis, explicitly explores and analyzes the components of activities, and investigates the pragmatic qualities of organizational work. Collaborative teams within organizations, such as schools, are an ideal fit for the type of analysis that activity theory supports. Activity theory is a developmental and emergent perspective that can help researchers understand the relationship of leadership to learning.

A critical conceptual component of this perspective is the idea of conjoint agency (Gronn, 2000). Conjoint agency is defined as the concertive work of pluralities of interdependent members of the organization. In schools, one form of conjoint agency would be groups of teachers working together in ways that influence one another’s
professional behavior. Individuals experience a sense *synergy* in these situations, as each gains something from each of the others in their development of innovative ideas (Gronn, 2002b). Reciprocal influence becomes “the defining attribute of concertive action” (p.431).

Gronn suggests that this concept of pluralistic agency is fundamental to the paradigm of distributed leadership. Linking agency only to individual action binds us to viewing leadership as a focused - to use Gibb’s (1954) words - phenomenon. Integrating the concept of conjoint agency into our distributed perspective of leadership facilitates the move to looking at interactional processes embedded within activities as the fundamental properties of leadership, rather than looking at roles and functions that we associate with particular individualistic behavior in hierarchical leadership structures.

Gronn (2002b) identifies two main types of distributed leadership: distributed leadership as *numerical action*; and distributed leadership as *concertive action*. The latter is further subdivided into three forms. The numerical action type occurs when the total leadership of an organization is broadly dispersed. This is the most well know and common version of distributed leadership. Gronn (2003) prefers not to classify this as delegation. It appears that his distinction rests on the locus of power in organizations. He associates delegation with centralized authority structures that send more work down to lower levels of the hierarchy with no increased measures of autonomy. We concur that this is precisely what is happening in many U.S. schools, so that in many schools that claim to be distributing leadership they are actually delegating responsibilities without also passing on the accompanying authority traditionally invested in those who perform such duties. This point was confirmed in our own case study research (Watson, 2005).
Forms of distributed leadership classified as concertive action specifically involved group functions, or the patterns of those group functions within an organization. The three subtypes add specificity and dimensionality to this concept. *Spontaneous collaboration* is characterized by “brief bursts of synergy which may be the extent of the engagement or the trigger for ongoing collaboration” (p.430). *Intuitive working relations* differ in that they “emerge over time when two or more organization members rely on each other and develop a close working relationship… leadership is manifest in the shared role space.” Alternatively, *institutionalized practices* are formal structures which are contrary to a traditional hierarchical system. They may be examples of organizational adaptation, intentional design, or both.

These forms of distributed leadership can be further classified according to the physical location in which the activities are performed. Gronn (2002b) labels work that is performed by members working together in close physical proximity as *co-performed work*. On the other hand, work that is performed by members spread across a site, or even in different sites, is termed *collectively performed work*. These distinctions are important to Gronn because of his interest on the influence of technology and communication infrastructures on the division of labor, and upon the performance of concertive action. Gronn suggests that collectively performed work is becoming more common because of more complex systems of communication. This distinction based upon physical location, however, may become rapidly obsolete in the world of instant real-time communication. When we work with colleagues over email we are co-performing a task even if physically separated.
Gronn (2002a) identifies interdependence and coordination as two fundamental properties of distributed leadership. Interdependence is defined as reciprocal dependence on multiple organization members. Gronn distinguishes between overlapping interdependence, which is essentially structural redundancy resulting from common needs for information and support, and complementary interdependence. The latter occurs when members pool differentiated resources and skills to perform tasks in a concertive fashion. The whole is literally greater than the sum of its parts. Recalling Thompson’s (1967) forms of interdependence, Gronn’s complementary independence is similar to Thompson’s pooled interdependence. Overlapping interdependence encompasses aspects of reciprocal interdependency, yet also acknowledges redundancy in a way that Thompson did not. Sequential interdependency is one dimension of the pooling of inputs that Gronn subsumes under overlapping interdependency.

Returning to Gronn’s (2002b) concept of conjoint agency, he also classified the types of synergies that are characteristic of collaborative interaction. These are cross-hierarchy, trusteeship, parity of relations, and separation of power. Parity of relations, a form of role-sharing that explicitly eschews status differentiation (Gronn, 2003), is indicative of many teacher team structures. Gronn’s discussion probes ways to get at the nature of conjoint agency, at how synergy is created. It ends up being mainly description of types of synergy, which provides some useful terms for an analytical discussion of the process of constituting synergy. The conceptual or methodological means at getting at this constitution are lacking, however. In our own research we use interaction analysis to fill this gap. It is a method that allows for picking apart these relationships to understand
the moment-by-moment construction of synergy. We suggest that synergy represents a kind of interactional interdependence that can be probed by examining conversation.

We have indulged in an extended discussion of Peter Gronn’s work because it is highly influential in our approach to studying school leadership and collaboration within organizations. Gronn’s work has the conceptual depth and scope to offer clear alternatives to conventional individualistic paradigms of leadership. The model’s interdisciplinary roots, drawing strongly from social interactionism and activity theory, contribute to its utility as a conceptual lens. Gronn’s work offers the most robust theoretical perspective for studying distributed leadership that is available in the literature. When linked with the significant conceptual contributions of other perspectives (Spillane et al., 2004) this approach to leadership studies offers great promise for new insights. Gronn’s references to activity theory in particular suggest powerful new pathways for exploring organizational behavior.

Activity Theory

Mediation by tools and signs is not merely a psychological idea. It is an idea that breaks down the Cartesian walls that isolate the individual mind from the culture and the society (Engeström, 1999; 29).

The origins of activity theory lie in the oft-discarded writings of Karl Marx. According to Engeström and Miettinen (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999), Marx was the first to clearly develop the concept of human activity as an object of study unto itself. Marx wrote that the artificial dualism of materialism and idealism could be spanned by looking at the concept of activity. The Russian scholars Leont’ev and Vygotsky continued in Marx’s vein and are traditionally looked to as the substantive forebears of activity theory. Vygotsky (1978) had dealt with the idea of individual action mediated by
cultural artifacts and signs. However it was Leont’ev who used the concept of collective activity to bring the notion of mediation via social interaction into a model of a theory of action (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

What activity theory gives us is a conceptual framework for bridging the gulf between agency and structure, between freewill and determinism. Activity theorists posit that artifacts, both physical and abstract, mediate between the will of individual agents and the objects of their action, or structure. A classic example explains how the activity of hunting among tribal people is a process in which the will of individuals is mediated by their available technology and social customs, such as ritual behavior. In social settings this theory of action becomes a theory of activity because other people also interact with the agent and the mediating artifacts. Artifacts are viewed as “cultural resources that are common to the society at large” (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p.8). In fact, social interaction itself can become a mediating artifact. The use of language, or verbal communication, is one primary artifact of human social interaction. It is an artifact and a constituent element of activity systems.

According to Engeström and Miettinen (1999) a schism developed in activity research around the idea of artifacts. One school of thought, strongly influenced by Leont’ev, focused more on the instrumental tool-mediated production of objects, or structure. Another perspective, more allied to Vygotsky, also put great emphasis upon expressive sign-mediated communication as an artifact. The latter perspective informs our approach to studying conversational interaction as an artifact that mediates the relationship between structure and agency. We suggest that the former tool-mediated perspective is actually the more dominant influence upon contemporary models of
distributed leadership. Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond’s (2004) approach is strongly influenced by this tradition. As a result they focus on what we call designed artifacts. In our research we have chose to pursue the investigation of emergent artifacts. We define emergent artifacts as mediating instruments of interaction that are improvisational in nature, yet also follow loosely patterned forms of utilization. They are “tools”, yet vary in detail from one instance to another, and do not necessarily reflect purposeful intent.

Engeström and Miettinen (1999) suggest that activity theory is a form of an interactive system model that takes “into account complex interactions between science, technology, and market, between designers and users of new technology” (p.9). This adds a dimension of historicity to analyses using activity theory. The various social and cultural forces that factor into human activities can be gleaned by identifying networks between activity systems that facilitate the flow of artifacts. Such a model lends itself well to the type of analysis proposed by this dissertation; namely to connect macro-social forces of market strategies, policy history, and educational reform to the modest work of individual teams of teachers working together in one high school.

The framework of an activity system model also offers a dynamic means of incorporating multiple perspectives into an analysis of a social setting:

The analyst constructs the activity system as if looking down on it from above. At the same time, the analyst must select a subject, a member (or better yet, multiple different members) of the local activity, through whose eyes and interpretations the activity is constructed. This dialectic between the systemic and subjective-partisan views brings the researcher into a dialogical relationship with the local activity under investigation. The study of an activity system becomes a collective, multivoiced construction of its past, present, and future zones of proximal development (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; p.10).
This seems to offer an ideal means of capturing the complex social interactions of teachers working together in collaborative activities. The conceptual system offers a way to incorporate analyses of organizational conditions, team interaction via conversation, and the influence of broad contextual forces. Thus the researcher can probe the situation, processes, and forces that impact on the work of teams of teachers. It also facilitates the examination of multiple forms of leadership at the same. The framework allows the researcher to conceptualize leadership in both focused and distributed forms.

Empirical Foundation

The framework this paper presents germinated from both the extensive review of the literature on distributed leadership that has just been discussed, as well as a qualitative case study (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, under review; Watson, 2005) of the use of collaborative teams in one Midwestern high school. This study sought to understand the interactive processes, particularly those rooted in conversational exchanges, which framed the enactment and emergence of leadership in teacher teams. The study also examined the organizational conditions that impacted upon team performance. Thus, we studied both situational and social forms of distributed leadership; the structural influences on collaboration and the social interaction which constituted interaction.

The study focused on two professional learning teams in a secondary school in a mid-sized community in the Midwest. The school had been involved in a number of comprehensive school reform efforts (i.e. Accelerated Schools, Coalition of Essential Schools) for some time, but was now embarking on the systematic implementation of professional learning teams. Two main varieties of teams were used; building-wide
interdisciplinary professional learning teams (B-PLTs), and grade/subject-level instructional professional learning teams (I-PLTs). We selected one team of each variety and observed their collaborative meetings for one semester. These meetings were videotaped and selectively transcribed. Interviews were also conducted with the school principal, individual team teachers, and focus groups of teachers (Watson, 2005). Documentary evidence of the activity of the teams was also collected. These data were then analyzed using both constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and interaction analysis (Sawyer, 2005).

Our findings led to the conclusions that organizational factors such as time, accountability, and governance structures influenced the outcomes of team performance in ways that served to limit the discretion and creativity of teachers (Watson, 2005). Additionally, we learned that teachers’ perceived sense of both team purpose and autonomy interacted with patterns of discourse to impact the nature of team collaboration (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, under review). The team with a sense of closed purpose and enabling autonomy were more likely to engage in what we labeled active discourse, a pattern that led to more decisive collaborative interactions. Alternatively, the team with a perceived open purpose and disabling autonomy engaged in what we call passive discourse, which led to tentative collaboration. Ultimately all of these factors and behaviors contributed to the creation of complex interactional routines in each team. These routines were regular in occurrence, yet improvisational in nature. Thus they could be counted on to occur, but the specific manifestation and outcome of a routine could not be predicted in advance. These routines were rooted in the conversational interaction of the teams and represented collectively constructed episodes of mutual influence that took
on patterned forms (Sawyer, Scribner, Watson, & Myers, 2005; Watson, 2005). These collectively-enacted improvisational conversation routines constituted the social distribution of leadership within the teams. We call this process *emergent reciprocal influence*. The framework which follows represents the conceptual and theoretical superstructure which surrounds our understanding of this idea.

We have suggested that these findings support a conception of leadership that rests upon the primacy of interaction as a constitutive force. It is nothing remarkable to note that leadership is indeed a social phenomenon. What seems to be more revealing, however, is the indication that some forms of leadership may not be able to exist independently, or in advance, of interaction. The implication is that *interaction* creates certain forms of leadership. This is the unique feature of socially distributed forms of leadership. These forms of leadership do not exist in roles or positions, or in particular functions or traits. The outcomes of such forms of leadership can not be predicted in advance. Socially distributed forms of leadership are improvisational in nature because they rest upon the spontaneous and unscripted nature of human interaction. Despite this, they can still be patterned and routinized, as our findings have suggested. These forms of leadership are inherently collaborative, and it seems logical to conclude that, given their foundation in social interaction, they are in fact the most common forms of leadership that are at work in organizational settings that involve a significant amount of interaction. Settings in which workers are highly isolated would not include such forms of leadership to any large degree. These routines are the forms of leadership that emerge from the sometimes mundane, yet pervasive, moment-to-moment interactions that we all have with others on a regular basis in settings such as schools.
Emergent Reciprocal Influence

A review of the literature on distributed leadership, and continued reflection upon our case study findings, has led to the creation of a conceptual framework for the analysis of leadership activity in collaborative contexts. The objective of this conceptual synthesis is to capture the process by which the collective agency of organizational members is transformed into organizational structure; in other words, to be able to see the effects of collaboration on the work of teachers and the school(s) they teach in; to see distributed leadership. Within the framework it is recognized that agency and structure are always interrelated. A dualistic perspective that treats agency and structure as separate and distinct is disavowed. Existing organizational structure is a constitutive frame for member agency, yet is also subject to reproduction or transformation by new member agency. The interrelationship of the two is intrinsic. It represents the praxis of the situational and social distribution of leadership. The processes that mediate this dynamic relationship were the central focus of our qualitative case study research (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, under review; Watson, 2005).

This framework, grounded in past and contemporary literature on distributed leadership as well as activity theory, offers a vision of the related processes of \textit{structuration} and \textit{enstructuration}. The creation of new structures within organizations is a product of the activity of pluralities of organizational members. This activity is both \textit{constituted by} and \textit{constitutive of} organizational conditions, or structure. \textit{Structuration} is the process by which member agency is constrained and influenced by existing structures. In our research we identified purpose, autonomy, time, accountability, and governance as critical dimensions of this process. These dimensions were traces of the
situational distribution of leadership. *Enstructuration*, alternatively, is the process through which new structural realities are created – or old structures are transformed. This activity, through which member agency becomes reified as structure, is the locus of socially distributed leadership. Individual organizational members’ cognitive will to act is transformed into a collective force – conjoint agency. When conjoint agency influences organizational structure it becomes concertive action. Our research identified patterns of discourse and interactional routines as evidence of this process.

We refer to the process of conjoint agency interacting with structure to produce concertive action as *emergent reciprocal influence*. This term captures the essence of the nature and process of distributed leadership within collaborative contexts, namely that it is a developing phenomenon (emergent), is rooted in social interaction (reciprocal), and involves a modification of the behavior of others (influence). A framework for emergent reciprocal influence is presented in Figure 1. It is presented in the form of an activity system. There are three primary dimensions to this framework; *agency*, *structure*, and *artifacts*. The interaction of these three dimensions is what activates concertive action.

*Agency*. Action is activated by personal agency. *Activity* is activated by conjoint agency. Conventional “focused” paradigms of leadership deal almost exclusively with what we might call personal agency. This is the type of agency that lies behind the actions of the mythical hero, or the transformational leader. As was discussed above, *conjoint agency*, of either a *collective* or a *co-performing* variety, leads to the concertive action of pluralities of individuals. In any activity system both forms of agency will be at work. After all it is individuals that make up a group. What we are primarily interested in, however, with collaboration are the interactions that lead to collaborative action, and the
effects of collaborative action. Thus we need to look at how conjoint agency is constituted. Personal agency is not ignored. It is an intrinsic component of the analysis, but is ultimately encompassed by the interactive processes that contribute to group activity. In the framework, agency is embedded in a reciprocal relationship with structure, being both influenced by it, and shaping it, respectively.

Cognition, both individual and distributed, is intimately involved with the manifestation of agency, as indicated on the left side of Figure 1. This is a factor of this dimension of distributed leadership that is developed more fully by Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004), and Halverson and Clifford (2004). We do not place the same degree of emphasis on this factor as these researchers, yet acknowledge its importance within the proposed activity system. Our focus is rather on the conversational interaction of individuals as an expressive and communicative representation of agency. Future syntheses of these two differing foci of investigation should have dynamic explanatory potential.
Figure 1. *Activity system of emergent reciprocal influence within organizations: An analytical framework.*

[Cognitive and agency flows leading to structured artifacts and structure, with emergent and designed elements, leading to zone of enstructuration and concertive action (constituted via the interplay of both agency and structure).]
**Structure.** The right side of the framework depicts the structural dimension of the activity system. Key factors of this dimension are the nature of organizational forms, levels of coordination, and types of interdependence. Organizational forms may be either focused or distributed (Gibb, 1954). Distributed forms are, of course, the focus of this study. Gronn’s (2002b) taxonomy of distributed forms (*spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practices*) offers a means of conceptualizing these organizational structures. The degree of coordination that is present among organizational forms can be represented along a range from tightly to loosely coupled (Weick, 1976) to indicate how much the form in question is linked to other elements of the organization. Interdependencies are interpreted using Thompson’s (1967) tripartite classification scheme of *pooled, reciprocal* and *sequential* interdependency. These latter concepts figure prominently in Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond’s (2004) model, which we suggest is more heavily weighted to the structural side of the framework in Figure 1.

**Artifacts.** Artifacts comprise the third dimension of the activity system of emergent reciprocal influence. It was noted above that there is currently a bias toward the examination of designed artifacts, or tools, as the cultural elements that mediate the relationship of agency and structure. In the framework, documents and policies are identified as examples of these types of artifacts. Such artifacts are common foci in studies based upon Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond’s (2004) model of distributed leadership.

The mediating influence of such artifacts is absolutely critical to our understanding of the processes that constitute distributed leadership. We do indeed live in a world framed
by designed artifacts. However, we also live in a social world constituted by emergent artifacts, many of which are conversational in nature. These artifacts mediate our relationship with existing and immanent structures in familiar and seemingly predictable ways, yet still remain intrinsically improvisational and unpredictable. As Sawyer (2003) indicates, the combinatoric possibilities, the degrees of freedom, of communicative interaction grow exponentially as an interactional episode continues. Our research revealed emergent artifacts that constitute leadership behavior in small groups of teachers; behavior that transforms conjoint agency into structure. These took the form of patterns of discourse and interactional routines.

We suggest that a further distinction between designed and emergent artifacts is that the latter are intimately related to the process of enstructuration, the influence of agency upon structure, to a greater degree than the former – the designed artifacts. We premise this on the observation that, being emergent, emergent artifacts are necessarily more deeply rooted in the idiosyncratic behavior of agents – either individuals or groups – and therefore are constituted by agency more than they are constitutive of agency. In short, we suggest that emergent artifacts can be wielded with greater discretion than designed artifacts. This was found to be true in the improvisationally-oriented routines of discourse and interaction that we identified in our own work. Designed artifacts, alternatively, have more of an effect of structuration, within the activity system. They are elements of structure that mediate the relationship of agency to structure. In the context of mediation they can, of course, be used to transform structure, but this is limited to their largely static nature. People are much more likely to mediate policies for instance, than vice versa (Lipsky, 1980). Emergent artifacts have a higher likelihood of transforming
existing structural conditions due to the more discretionary and improvisational nature of their manifestation. This relationship between artifacts, agency, and structure forms the core of our framework for studying leadership within collaborative contexts. We believe that this framework offers a useful perspective for approaching leadership from a vantage point rooted in interaction; one that is distinct from a perspective that is overly tied to the behavior or traits of individuals in specific positions. This latter focus is not abandoned. It is identified as one piece of the puzzle that frames the behavior of groups of people working together. The primary focus of the framework, however, is the collective interaction of organizational members. This interaction can be conceived of at a variety of organizational levels. Our focus has been at the level of professional learning teams.

Conclusion

This paper began with the recognition that leadership is a complex concept that defies easy definition or classification. This is true of many concepts that we use to refer to important aspects of the social world. As social scientists know, the social world is a dynamic arena to attempt to study. Wittgenstein’s (1953) notion of family resemblance concepts was offered as a heuristic for grappling with concepts that do not easily submit to precise definitions. Leadership indeed appears to be a classic example of the type of idea that fits this label. We have sought to explore literature and research for a new framework to use for leadership research. One reason for this is our own dissatisfaction with the capacity of existing models to account for leadership that is not tied to specific positions or individuals.

Existing models have great utility in addressing some forms of leadership; some parts of that family of ideas that put together make the concept of leadership. It is our
interest in exploring emergent leadership that exists independently of formal leadership structures and positions that has led us to a distributed leadership perspective. In studying and applying this perspective we have discovered that it may apply to even more manifestations of leadership than we had previously suspected. In fact, there may be elements of this framework that underlie all instances of leadership, since leadership appears to be an intrinsically social phenomenon (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). We do not, however, suggest that our findings supplant existing views of leadership, but rather that they complement such views. We have noted the complexity and the contextual contingency of leadership. As such, leadership is a concept that should be consistently probed for greater understanding.

Our framework contributes to the growing interest in emergent and distributed leadership by identifying the locus of socially distributed leadership between the forces of structure and agency, and focusing on the key role of emergent artifacts in the manifestation of leadership within collaborative activity. We believe that the detail of our framework offers possibilities for testing the efficacy of various factors and ideas as necessary conditions for the presence of leadership. Furthermore, the framework points out the specific relationships between individuals and groups and the broader organizational structures they operate within. Further refinement and empirical testing of this framework promises to reveal even more detail about the constitution of leadership through social interaction.
References


