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Exploration of embedded professional learning models to promote critical and creative thinking in students

Maura Manning

Director of Teaching and Learning

Pymble Ladies’ College

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Introduction:

School improvement has been mandated by recent state and federal government edicts in Australia. Part of the school improvement agenda is the introduction of the Australian Curriculum with its general capabilities that place particular focus on critical and creative thinking skills. Educators have long advocated the importance of fostering these “21st Century skills to assist students in navigating an uncertain future.

Literature indicates schools do not improve without effective professional learning programs. School leaders need to make time and structures for teachers to collaborate and learn together. Leaders can develop teachers’ sense of agency to build classroom cultures that encourage critical and creative thinking.

Recent research by Yoon et. al. (2007) indicates that for professional learning to be meaningful and to make significant improvements in student learning, it must be on average 49 hours spread over six to 12 months. Further research has shown that the key to improved learning for students is continual, job-embedded learning for educators. (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006)

The importance of rigorous and systematic professional learning models is increasingly important as New South Wales (and Australia) look toward implementation of the Australian Curriculum and the Professional Teaching Standards. In New South Wales, we have many opportunities through professional bodies for professional development, but few are sustained or embedded. There is little collaboration across different school systems and between individual schools.

From 22 November until 23 December, 2012, I explored how continuous, job-embedded professional development and professional networks in the United States can improve teaching and learning that promotes critical and creative thinking within and across schools. I looked at the integration of professional learning into schools’ daily routines and ways to share and reflect on knowledge in a systematic way between individuals, schools and systems to increase the learning opportunities for teachers and administrators.

This report is organised by the different organisations or concepts that I investigated. These key areas are Cultures of Thinking, Project Zero, Learning Forward, Instructional Rounds and District 2 in New York City. Under each of these headings are a range of models and ideas that have informed my thinking about professional learning.

Issue 1: Cultures of Thinking

Cultures of Thinking emerged from Harvard University’s Project Zero and are defined as “places where a group’s collective as well as individual thinking is valued, visible, and actively promoted as part of the regular, day-to-day experience of all group members.”

Drawing on research by Ron Ritchhart (2002), schools across the world are focusing on how the eight cultural forces -- language, time, environment, opportunities, routines, modelling, interactions, and expectations -- in every school, classroom and group learning situation can be directed towards thinking. These schools have rich professional learning cultures that assist in maintaining their Cultures of Thinking.

I visited a range of schools in Detroit, Washington D.C, Boston and New York that were engaged in this endeavour to examine how they supported their staff in their professional learning.

**Oakland Schools**Detroit Michigan

Oakland County has 28 school districts and serves approximately 222,000 students at 450 schools with 25,000 staff. Oakland Schools is the administrative organisation that supports the individual school districts to meet their students’ needs through professional learning programs for teachers and administrators.

I joined Oakland Schools for two sessions of their ‘Professional Learning for Cultures of Thinking’ program. This involved teachers coming together from across the schools to work with Ron Ritchhart and share their learning from their different contexts.

For the last two years Oakland Schools have been working towards building cultures of thinking across their 28 school districts. Schools are at different points in their implementation of cultures of thinking. The professional learning program has been staged and differentiated to accommodate for the varying degrees of understanding. While some schools had well established cultures of thinking, others were just commencing their journey in 2012.

Oakland Schools has worked with Ron Ritchhart to build a professional learning plan. They have organised a series of professional learning sessions where teachers from across the schools come together to work with Ron Ritchhart. For the schools at the beginning of their journey, a school leader and two teachers come to the formal session. The idea is that these participants will have the opportunity to return to their respective schools and share their learning with their colleagues through a distributed leadership model.

The great strengths of this program were the fact that people were coming together from different contexts to engage in professional discussions. The discussions on these days were made very exciting by the enthusiasm of the teachers. There was a strong sense of shared purpose and an active culture of enquiry. Each of the teachers and schools brought with them genuine puzzles. The informal learning that was occurring in parallel to the formal learning was extraordinary. People brought questions that they were discussing with colleagues from other schools.

**Washington International School**Washington D.C.

Washington International School is a pre-K-12 coeducational school for 900 students that has a well-established culture of thinking. Jim Reece, Director of Studies, shared the range of professional learning underway in the school. Like other schools implementing cultures of thinking, the staff professional learning teams or focus groups are a key piece of their program. Reece spoke of how the focus groups were no longer centrally facilitated. Initially, he facilitated the groups, and then established co-facilitators for each group, but now the groups are self-sustaining and all members are facilitators.

A unique piece of the Washington International School’s professional learning was their use of video to document their practice. Individual teachers filmed lessons where they were implementing various pedagogies or routines that promote thinking. They then filmed a reflection on their lesson. This was edited by their technology department. The result is a short film of best practice and reflection that could be posted on the school’s intranet and shared with all staff. It was a great model of thoughtful and reflective practice.

**Sidwell Friends School**Washington D.C.

Sidwell Friends School has approximately 1,100 students from pre-K-12 and 152 teachers and a well-established culture of thinking in its middle school. I was hosted by Ann Charney, a middle school English teacher who has worked extensively with Harvard’s Project Zero. Ann has responsibility for the professional learning of the middle school teachers. Part of the structure embedded at this school is small learning teams of staff who come together around professional discussions. The teams were cross-divisional and taught the same groups of students. They were able to draw links across their subjects and focus on how learning could be maximised for their particular group of students.

An interesting piece of the professional learning was their documentation of their learning. Staff members created poster displays that detailed stories of learning in their classrooms. They showed the intent of learning experiences, the activities done by the students, samples of student learning and reflections from students and teachers.

Sidwell Friends dismissed students early (at 2:30) once a week to provide a block of time for teachers to learn together.

**Cambridge Rindge and Latin School**Cambridge, Massachusetts

Cambridge Rindge and Latin is a co-educational school with approximately 1,600 students from year 9- year 12 that was established in 1648. Joan Soble, professional development teacher coach and English teacher, shared their journey towards a culture of thinking. This school is well placed in Boston to establish sustained links with universities. Harvard University and Lesley College worked with CRLS on a range of research projects.

This school was interesting because its culture of thinking endures despite little support from the administration. While the culture of thinking is firmly established, there were no allocations or formal structures in place to support it. Throughout the school there were groups of teachers coming together to share their stories of practice. One of their innovative practices was their Exhibition Days. Teachers shared documentation of the learning in their classrooms. Again, like Sidwell Friends, teachers made posters of their students’ learning. These were displayed in the common room and they invited teachers from other schools and researchers from the local universities to share the celebration of professional learning.

**The British International School of New York**New York, New York

The British International School of New York is an independent school with 280 students from age 3 to age 14. Shehla Ghouse, Director of Curriculum and Deputy Head, shared the school’s professional learning processes to promote a culture of thinking. She referred to her methods as a “drip feed” – small amounts over a continuous time period.

Because of the small size of the school, Shehla was able to personally meet with every faculty once a week. During this time she was able to work closely with teachers to demonstrate how they could use thinking routines and performances of understanding in their programs. She was able to focus on particular areas and empower teachers to implement these pedagogies in their classrooms. She supplemented these ongoing professional learning sessions with book study groups that met once a month and focus groups where teachers shared evidence of student thinking using the “Looking At Student Thinking” protocol.

Shehla had also organised a critical friends network within the school that saw groups of three or four teachers undertaking observations of each other and providing written feedback to each other. These groups were carefully organised by Shehla to ensure their composition spanned different subjects, experience levels and year levels.

Issue 2: Project Zero

**Harvard Graduate School of Education, Boston**

I had the opportunity to meet with two Project Zero researchers who are working on different projects with schools. Project Zero was founded in 1967 at the Harvard Graduate School of Education with a mandate to work on the area of arts education. It began as a collection of research assistants and senior scholars including Howard Gardner and David Perkins. Their work has evolved over the decades, but they continue to have many educational research projects underway.

While the subjects of projects underway at Project Zero are of interest to me, it is also the structure of university researchers working with practising teachers and students to learn together that is of interest. Interestingly, Project Zero works with a range of schools in Victoria through the Independent Schools Victoria network, but there is no similar model underway in New South Wales. This is certainly an area for investigation in this state.

**Cultivating Collaborative Learning Communities**

Of great interest was Daniel Wilson’s work on collaborative learning communities. He has synthesised research around collaboration that indicates:

* + Group learning increases student academic achievement, conceptual understanding, and prosocial behaviours/ attitudes. (Cohen, 1994; Slavin, 2010).
  + Informal learning is the basis for 70% of professional knowledge. (Leslie et al, 1998).
  + Teacher inquiry groups increase teacher satisfaction and motivation and student performance (Little et al, 2003).
  + Collaborative leadership models account for 27% of the variation of student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Louis et al, 2010).

Daniel spoke about the factors that enable collaboration:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Shared goals, vision  Motivating challenge  Relevant problem  Diversity of views  Clear roles  Shared leadership | No egos  Equality, democracy  Honesty  Trust  Mutual respect  Taking risks | Time to meet  Fun and humour  Space and food  Open communication  Feedback  Persistence |

He also spoke of the fundamental tensions between knowing and trusting that exists when people collaborate to learn. He talked about how people need to create a shared certainty and at the same time maintain doubt. Similarly, he spoke of the need for trust in collaboration. There is a need for individuals to demonstrate competencies and disclose vulnerabilities.

He suggested one of the ways to build trust is to use routines and protocols for all professional learning meetings. They help to provide a safe environment for individuals to be vulnerable.

My question to Daniel was how we might create environments where we can foster these tensions in healthy balance within schools and between schools. I spoke to him about the competition between independent schools in New South Wales and the competition between sectors.

He spoke of the need for the school leaders (or perhaps individual teachers) to find a problem that they genuinely need to come together to solve. Each collaborator needs a vested interest in the problem. He suggested that a threat is an opportunity for collaboration. He also spoke of the need of finding a problem that demands the unique differences of different schools to solve the problem.

Issue 3: Learning Forward 2012 Annual Conference

**Boston, Massachusetts**

“Learning Forward is the only association devoted exclusively to advancing professional learning for student success. Our vision is ensuring that every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.”

I attended the Learning Forward 2012 Annual Conference – Connect. Engage. Learn with 2,700 other teachers and school administrators from around the United States and the world. The focus of the conference was professional learning and I was able to attend sessions in which teachers and university researchers were sharing professional learning models from across the U.S.

Some highlights included:

* + Michael Fullan and Andrew Hargreaves – Building Professional Capital
  + Richard Elmore – How Schools Learn to Improve: Some Lessons from Clinical Practice and Research
  + Pam Grossman – Investing in Teachers: Leveraging Observation Protocols for Instructional Improvement
  + Joan Rooney -- iPD: Imagine the Possibilities
  + Jonathon Saphier – Skilful Leadership to Improve Teaching and Learning in Every Classroom
  + Establishing and sustaining structures for thinking and collaborating Fairfax county schools

Key messages that emerged over the conference included:

* + The school as workplace is the prime site for teacher learning.
  + Instructional leadership. Presenters emphasised the need for school leaders to be authentic instructional leaders in touch with what is happening in classrooms.
  + Instructional coaching. Many schools and school districts across the U.S. are using a variety of models to provide sustained coaching for their teachers. Some presenters were discussing ways of coaching teachers through virtual platforms.
  + “Deprivatising” practice. Teachers need opportunities to see models of practice and to reflect on their own practice.
  + Professional Learning Communities. Many school use systematic teams of teachers working together to discuss student learning as the foundation of their professional learning.
  + Shifting paradigm of education. Richard Elmore stated that he sees the clinical work he is doing now as “palliative care for a dying institution”. Elmore believes that schools as we currently conceive them are moving towards extinction.

Issue 4: Instructional Rounds

**Harvard Graduate School of Education**

“Instructional Rounds” is a process based on the medical rounds model. In the same way that medical rounds are used in medical schools and teaching hospitals develop the diagnostic and treatment practice of physicians, the Instructional Rounds model embraces the idea that practitioners can work together to solve common problems and improve their practice. The process provides a “common practice disciplined by protocols and routines and organised around the core functions of schooling in order to create common language, ways of seeing, and shared practice of improvement.” (City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel, 2010)

At its core, Instructional Rounds is about improving teaching and learning. It borrows aspects of walkthroughs, networks and district improvement strategies. It consists of a four step process: identifying a problem, observing, debriefing and focusing on the next level of work.

The process involves building a network of schools (or a network within a school) who will participate in the process. Each school individually develops a problem of practice that they are working on as a whole school. This problem of practice is shared with the network. The network of approximately 10 individuals then goes through the rounds process of observing a range of classrooms in a specified time looking specifically at the problem of practice. After the observation process, the group comes together to document what they saw without judgement. Following this the group looks for patterns and makes predictions based on the observations. The group then makes recommendations to the school that help to inform their next level of work. The school then brings these recommendations back to its whole staff. This process is undertaken on an ongoing basis allowing each member school to benefit from the group’s recommendations.

I participated in a four-day institute at Harvard with 107 participants from schools around the United States, Canada and Sweden. The structure of the institute is that teams of teachers and administrators come from individual schools or districts to undertake the process of rounds and to reflect on how it could be implemented in their context. Two full rounds experiences are executed during the institute, which entails two school visits and then the debriefing process.

The strengths of the Instructional Rounds Process:

* + Opportunity to look inside other schools and learn from them
  + Opportunity to work with network of other educators
  + Opportunity for feedback from people with “fresh eyes” across a problem of practice in the school
  + Structure of the process is helpful for refining professional learning agenda in a school
  + Observation provides a catalyst for reflection on one’s own practice.

Challenges of Instructional Rounds Process:

* + The network is only as good as its individuals. If the individuals in the network are poorly informed, the process is not as beneficial as it could be.
  + Building trust between schools could be an issue. There has to be a high level of trust within the network to allow a school to be vulnerable to the process and to learn from it.

Issue 5: District 2

**New York City**

Beginning in 1987, the reform carried out by Anthony Alvarado in New York City’s District 2 has been hailed as a pioneering effort in school reform. Before this initiative, reform had been carried out school-by-school. Alvarado showed that through central leadership, the achievement standards of all students could be lifted when schools worked together with a single-minded focus on improving the quality of instruction in schools. This district worked with Richard Elmore from Harvard, Lucy Calkins from Teachers College at Columbia University as well as other educational experts including Diane Snowball from Australia to implement a rigorous professional learning plan for all teachers.

While the momentum of this movement has been fragmented due to political changes and a restructuring of the districts, many of the professional learning networks and practices survive despite receiving no formal support. Principals and teachers admit that the vibrant learning culture is not as robust and dynamic as it was in its heyday under Alvarado’s leadership, but the fact that it continues at all is testament of its worth.

I visited four District 2 schools while in New York and spoke to their principals and teachers about their professional learning models. The schools I visited were:

* + PS 6 – The Lillie Deveraux Blake School
  + MS 167 – The Robert F. Wagner Middle School
  + MS 131 – Dr Sun Yat Sen Middle School
  + NYC iSchool

Each of these schools was a member of the same Instructional Rounds network. They had been a network for approximately five years and each felt the trust level was high in the network. Phyllis Tam, Principal of MS 131, indicated that the Instructional Rounds process was a useful way for her school to inform their professional learning. She was able to provide feedback from Rounds to her Instructional Leadership Team which would then establish how the areas of concern would be addressed in the school.

The concept of the Instructional Leadership Team was interesting. In MS 131, the team consisted of individuals from each faculty who were interested in problem-solving on a school-wide basis. They would come together twice a month to collaboratively enquire around challenges the school faced. There was not a formal allocation for this team, but it was a great way of distributing leadership and developing teacher leaders.

PS 6 was interesting because it had strong professional learning leadership through its team of Literacy and Numeracy Coaches. These were individuals employed with the sole purpose of coaching teachers to better meet the needs of students in terms of literacy and numeracy. They worked with individual teachers and with groups to provide workshops and real-time coaching in the classroom.

The Literacy Coaches worked with consultants from Teachers College at Columbia University. This was an ongoing relationship that saw university researchers working with teachers to model best practice and share resources. I observed a day of professional development with a representative from Teachers College who came to the school and modelled particular approaches. Because she worked with the school on an ongoing basis, she knew the teachers and the students. She came in and taught classes while teams of teachers observed her. She would then debrief with the teachers reflection on their learning and the students’ learning.

This process was dynamic and effective. It allowed teachers to see how particular strategies could work in their own classes.

Reflections

The best professional learning programs and initiatives I saw had grown through teacher leadership and emerged from classrooms. Teacher leadership is the concept of teachers leading learning rather than individuals in official leadership positions imposing initiatives on teachers. When an initiative is good, it will grow from teacher to teacher. The most effective schools I visited had principals who were in classrooms on a daily basis and had very flat organisational structures with high functioning teacher study groups. The concept of instructional leadership was very important and many schools had extensive and effective staff coaching or mentoring systems in place. Schools with open classrooms and robust cultures of peer observation were focused on improving teaching and learning. It is important to respect the principles of adult learning and ensure a diversity of learning opportunities are available to teachers to ensure there are different entry points to honour the experience teachers bring to their professional learning. I also learned the power of schools working together in collaborative enquiry initiatives. There is enormous scope for schools to be working more closely with our universities in New South Wales on sustained initiatives that collectively build our capacity to provide a dynamic and effective education to our students that genuinely prepares them to embrace the challenges of the 21st century.

*70% of professional knowledge is built informally (US Centre for Workforce Development, 1998), but only 10% of professional learning budgets focus on informal learning. (Zenger et al, 2005)*