

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FOR IMPACT

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I began teaching at a time when there were no professional standards for teachers. There was not a clear articulation of what good teaching looked like, or of the key elements that together would create effective teaching practice. In the absence of standards, like many teachers, I developed my own framework for analysing the effectiveness of my teaching. I quickly came to realise that three things were critical to the successful engagement and learning of the students in my care. I framed these elements as; 'What I taught' (ensuring that I had a deep understanding of the curriculum), 'How I taught' (developing a pedagogy to engage all students in the curriculum content) and 'Who I taught' (having a strong understanding of, care for, and belief in each of my students). While this framework worked for me in developing effective teaching practices within the context of my classroom, there was another element that, over the course of my career, I realised was having a powerful impact on my teaching capacity, and that was 'Who I taught with'.

Over the last ten years there has been a growing body of evidence of the power of collaborative professional learning for teachers, and the value of creating the conditions within schools that enable teachers to plan together, teach together and assess the impact of their teaching together. In my own research with over 6000 teachers who were asked to identify the key activities that enabled their professional growth, teachers highlighted the importance of working together beyond the functional boundaries of their own classrooms. Teachers identified the importance of the collaborative preparation of teaching units, lessons and teaching materials as well as assessment tasks as key avenues for their learning. They also highlighted the importance of observing other teachers, being observed and receiving feedback. (1)

In many ways this process can be a powerful and effective way to improve our learning about our teaching whilst also improving the learning of our students. It involves strengthening our understanding of the curriculum, and our knowledge about how best to teach it, through constantly evaluating how well our students have learnt. It involves us working closely together to analyse the effectiveness of various teaching techniques. In doing so we add to our expertise both as individuals as well as to our profession. When we teach and learn together in this way we begin to reconceptualise our schools as not only places for students to learn but also as places for teachers to learn. We become an evidence informed and knowledge creating profession.

In order for these collaborative practices to have full effect we need to share a commitment to, and belief in, our capacity to make a difference to the learning of each student. We also need to be driven, not so much by beyond school accountability but more by a deep responsibility to the learning of each of our students. This responsibility requires a focus on high expectations for the success of our students as well as creating high expectations for our success as teachers. This responsibility, when shared in a trusting, growth-orientated environment, creates a powerful avenue for continuous collective learning. At its most fundamental level this trust is characterised by an openness to share issues of uncertainty and a level of professional respect that creates a willingness to seek constructive feedback to improve practice.(2)

These elements are central to professional learning that enables a higher correlation between teaching and student learning. Collaborative professional learning that focusses on the impact of leadership and teaching practices on student learning outcomes enables teachers to continually learn from one another through shared high expectations, planning, teaching and assessing together, and conducting in-depth critical examination of what does and doesn't work to enhance student achievement.

This notion of collaborative professional learning is at the core of what policy and academic literature refers to as a learning organisation. In essence, this is an organisation that is inclusive and responsive. One in which there is an awareness that continuous professional learning, through the collective endeavours of the team, is the key to improving student learning outcome.

The OECD working paper that examined schools as learning organisations, identified seven dimensions that describe the school actions necessary to operate as an effective learning organisation. These dimensions focus on:

- developing and sharing a vision centred on the learning of all students
- creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff
- promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff
- establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration
- embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning
- learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system
- modelling and growing learning leadership. (3)

Further insights can be gained when we consider the key elements that school leadership teams identify as leading to success. Louise Stoll's extensive experience in learning organisations in England resulted in research in which she examined the factors that underpin successful school led research projects. She focussed on the importance of pedagogy, professional development and leadership. The following ten themes were seen to be critical to the success of the research projects.

- Be clear about the difference you want to make
- Engage interest and commitment - involve others and distribute leadership
- Talk about learning to build trust relationships
- Embrace and persist with challenge
- Support peers' learning and growth
- Be flexible and adaptable
- Emphasise development over judgement
- Take and make time
- Draw on external expertise – don't go it alone
- Work towards cultural change and sustainability. (4)

Over the last six years through the *3 Rivers 4 Learning* program, I have engaged in significant learning with over 146 school teams who have sought to transform their teaching and leadership practices to improve student learning.

As a result of their experience within the program these school teams have identified the following ten success factors for teams leading school led reforms that seek to improve their impact.

- *Shared, valued rationale for the difference you seek*
- *Implement a clear methodology for inquiry and innovation*
- *Be open to learning from student, teacher, community voice*
- *Seek feedback and evidence of impact*
- *Ensure team trust enables practice to be challenged*
- *Empower teacher learning and decision making*
- *Maintain positive mindsets and collective efficacy*
- *Share responsibility for sustained ownership*
- *Respect others, know your team & draw on strengths*
- *Ascertain impact, celebrate success & share learning (5)*

These approaches provide a practical point of reference for teams seeking to make a difference. The first process in leading improvement is to focus on inquiry and to have a clear, shared understanding of the issue that needs to be addressed and why it matters. Being clear about the difference that you want to make involves the analysis of current practice, imagining a better future and having the moral commitment to bring this imagined future to reality.

Five key processes were identified by the schools as being highly valuable in ensuring deep engagement and shared responsibility for improvement. Each of these processes required the teams to learn more about the impact of their current actions while also framing their goals for the future. The five processes are;

- Shared inquiry leading to the co-creation of clearly understood and purposeful collective goals.
 - An analysis revealing a clearly evidenced gap between current outcomes and the desired future outcome.
 - Collective strategies for knowledge creation and collaborative learning about the impact of current practices, and ways to take action to achieve goals.
 - Collaborative professional learning enabling shared responsibility and authentic action.
 - Evidence of impact and feedback to drive ongoing commitment to learning and improvement.
- (5)

Through this process, it has been clear that the way in which leaders, establish and talk about goals and accountability, has a strong influence on teacher engagement, motivation and efficacy. When teachers are engaged in deep collaborative inquiry and professional learning that is focussed on learning more about their impact, they develop not only their capability, but also a shared responsibility for improvement. The process of collaborative inquiry supports not only student learning but also teacher and leader learning. When leaders engage as co-learners in the process of inquiry, the gaps between roles and experience and expertise are bridged. New learning about the impact of current actions is shared, and the co-creation of new deeply owned understandings, becomes the focus for new strategies as well as further learning.

The process of inquiry and knowledge creation through thoughtful, purposeful, adaptive practice, enables powerful learning for both teachers as well as their students.

The three enabling streams, or rivers, for powerful and impactful learning are: **inquiry**, to understand the impact of current practices, **innovation**, to co-create new evidence informed ways to improve learning, and **inspiration** to enable shared responsibility and deep purposeful engagement. The most powerful inquiry springs from dynamic and iterative feedback cycles that challenge assumptions and expand perception.

These cycles create new data and insights to enable evidence informed decisions and the co-creation of contextually relevant innovations and pathways to enhance achievement. At the heart of powerful collaborative inquiry are the learning dispositions that enable progress. Inquiry focussed leadership is cognisant that learning is more than an outcome. It is a way of being that is enabled through dispositions, or mindsets, including integrity, respect, optimism, courage, curiosity and altruism. (5)

In Australia, it is not only excellence but also equity that matters. We are highly cognisant of the need to ensure that a child's circumstances are not the key determinant of their future. Our commitment to ensuring that every young person receives an education that enables them to leave school with dignity, purpose and options gives us a strong focus for our teaching and our leadership. It requires us to further develop shared responsibility to focus on continuous improvement, to be constantly evaluating the difference we made, how we made it, and what we need to do next to enable us to have an even greater impact.

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REFLECTING ON, & PLANNING TO, ACTION LEARNING

- What has resonated most strongly for you? Why?
- What has changed in your thinking as a result of your learning?
- Where do you see the greatest opportunity for improvement in your current context?
- What will you now do differently?
- What impact are you seeking?
- How will this be evidenced?
- What would you like to learn more about?

I trust you find this paper and these questions of benefit. Ann en.plein.air@hotmail.com