

# Exploring Perceptions of 'Significant Change' in Reforming Schools

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(with grateful acknowledgment of the contributions of the participants in the South West Learning Circle, North East Learning Circle and Secondary Learning Circle)

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# Exploring Perceptions of ‘Significant Change’ in Reforming Schools

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## **Abstract**

*In South Australia, schools in the Learning to Learn Project receive funding for teachers to engage in professional development and trial educational reforms aimed at improving learning opportunities for teachers and students. Designated change leaders from each school attend Learning Circles with project and university colleagues to develop their understanding of educational change and the associated benefits, risks, dilemmas and tensions. This year, to deepen understanding of the complexity of change, the Learning Circles have been using the ‘Most Significant Change Approach’, a process designed by Rick Davies as a tool for evaluating change projects and promoting organisational learning among participants (Davies, 1996). This process involves participants writing stories about what they perceive to be ‘significant change’ as a result of involvement in the project, and engaging in a process of discussion and selection to identify those stories that are considered to be most illustrative of significant change. This paper will elaborate the process as it has been interpreted in Learning Circles, and the insights that participants have derived about what is valued as significant change.*

## **Introduction**

Since 1999, the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services has provided funding for selected schools to participate in a program of education renewal through involvement in the Learning to Learn Project. In a forthcoming report the broad objectives of the Project are described as:

- Connecting South Australia to the latest and enduring learning research and analysis of world’s best practice to develop the knowledge base of Project sites, Curriculum Policy Directorate and the wider system.
- Developing our understanding of the industrial construction of schooling (assumptions, worldview and consequent structures) to build our capacity for challenge.
- Reconnecting teachers and leaders to their vocation to create new partnerships in policy development. (Foster, Barratt & Mellowship, Forthcoming)

Schools in the Project receive funding to send school leaders and groups of teachers to a Core Learning Program which draws on the expertise of educational theorists from Australia and overseas. These experiences provide the stimulus for site wide programs aimed at transformation of the local learning environment for students and teachers. However, it is important to note that this program is not about telling educators what they should be doing, but rather exposes them to a range of cutting edge theories, thinking and research to support their learning and decision making at the local level. Principals and designated change leaders in each site, project managers, Departmental Curriculum officers and university colleagues attached to the project meet together regularly in Learning Circles, each encompassing between 6-8 of the sites involved in the project. The purpose of the Learning Circles is to provide the opportunity for participants to reflect on and share their insights, tensions, concerns, dilemmas and questions as leaders of the change process, and to grow their understanding of the process. Over the past twelve months a number of Learning Circles have been using the Most Significant Change Process (Davies, 1996) as a vehicle for reflecting on

and developing participants' understandings of what constitutes significant change in an education setting.

### **Overview of the Most Significant Change (MSC) Process**

The MSC Process was developed by Rick Davies for use in the evaluation of a social development program in Bangladesh (Davies, 1996). It also goes under several other names such as 'the Evolutionary Approach to Organisational Learning', 'the Narrative Approach' and also 'the Story Approach' (Dart, Drysdale, Cole & Saddington, 2000). It has continued to be used by many international development organisations (Dart & Davies, 2003). It is an evolutionary 'dialogical, story-based technique' that was designed as an alternative to the 'conventional monitoring against quantitative indicators' that typifies many evaluation instruments (Dart and Davies, 2003, pp 137-138). The process engages participants in writing stories of 'significant change' followed by dialogue about groups of stories in order to select those stories that are perceived to be most indicative of significant changes. According to Dart and Davies (2003) this technique is 'conceived as a form of dynamic values inquiry whereby designated groups of stakeholders continuously search for the significant program outcomes and then deliberate on the value of these outcomes' (p. 140).

Davies (1996) summarised the seven key differences of his evolutionary approach when compared to orthodox evaluation approaches as follows:

- Agreement on the meaning of events is an outcome of the process and subject to revision in the light of new experience (p. 7).
- Experience is summarised by selection rather than by inclusion (p. 8).
- It is an inductive and open-ended approach where indicative events are abstracted out of recent experience (p. 8).
- Those closest to the experience being monitored have the right to pose to those above them a range of competing interpretations of events (p. 9).
- Information is not stored or processed centrally, but is distributed throughout the organisation and processed locally (p. 9)
- It makes use of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), closely textured accounts of events, placed in their local context, and where the role of the observer and their subjectivity, is visible (p. 9).
- The contents of the monitoring system are potentially more dynamic and adaptive (p. 9).

It is these characteristics that made the process appear to be one well suited for use by Learning to Learn participants. With the growing emphasis on accountability in all areas of government funding it had become a high priority for participants in the latest phase of the Learning to Learn Project to collect data about outcomes linked to their involvement in the Project. However, the limitations of traditional quantitative evaluation procedures had also been recognized;

A project such as Learning to Learn which aims to reculture through changed individual and collective understandings of learning faces an often seemingly irreconcilable tension when it comes to evaluation...Attempting to measure the value added or the distance traveled with traditional measures...does not allow us to capture the profound shifts in school culture towards a learning centred community. (Foster, 2002, p. 1)

Along with a range of other data collection techniques, it was decided at the end of 2002 to trial the use of the MSC Process in Learning Circles as both a means of collecting rich, qualitative data, but also as a means of supporting participants to clarify their personal values about significant change and develop individual and shared understandings about the indicators of significant change. This paper examines the insights which have emerged from

three of the Learning Circles in which the authors have been involved as Project Manager (Foster), Project Officers (Barratt and Mellowship) or university colleagues (Le Cornu and Peters). The data on which it is based comprise observations and documentation from the Learning Circles, transcripts of two debriefing meetings held by the authors, the ‘Significant Change’ stories produced by participants in the first round of the process and a written survey of participants about their responses to the process after the first trial.

### **1. Interpreting the MSC Process for Learning Circles**

Part of our role within the project is to plan and facilitate three of the Learning Circles. The decision to introduce the MSC Process to schools in Phase 2 of the Learning to Learn Project was initially made at the project management level and was included in each school’s memorandum of agreement at the end of 2002. It seemed logical to use Learning Circles as a vehicle for introducing and trialing the process. We faced the challenges early this year of interpreting the process in a way that would have meaning at our local level and convincing Learning Circle participants that trialing it would be a worthwhile use of Learning Circle time. To do this we drew on and modified the work of Dart et al (2000) who had interpreted Davies’ original process for monitoring a dairy industry development project. Dart et al identified seven key steps in their interpretation of the process:

- taste-testing the process;
- establishing domains of change (loose categories of change used to distinguish different kinds of stories);
- establishing a reference group;
- collecting stories;
- reviewing stories in each domain and selecting the one most illustrative of significant change;
- sharing stories with a wider audience; and
- conducting a secondary analysis of stories.

These steps appeared to provide an entrée to the process which was compatible with Learning Circles. However, there were also aspects of the Dart et al process that were not consistent with our situation. Most notably, in the dairy industry project the stories of significant change were, in most cases, reported verbally by farmers to project officers who wrote stories based on these accounts. We were intending that stories be written by Learning Circle participants, in the first instance, with the option of later rounds of stories being sort from other stakeholders such as members of the wider staff, students and parents. Another significant difference was that the dairy industry stories went through a selection process conducted by groups at increasingly higher levels in the project’s hierarchy. Our intention, at least initially, was that the discussion and selection of stories would occur within each Learning Circle, with an option for circulating stories to wider audiences at a later point if it seemed useful and appropriate. Finally, the purpose of the story writing in the dairy project was primarily to evaluate the project and demonstrate accountability to a range of stake-holders, whereas we were most interested in using it as a tool for learning about change, but hoped that it might also provide rich qualitative data about outcomes for purposes of project accountability. We identified the aims for incorporating the process into Learning Circles as:

- providing space for participants to reflect on and make sense of the complex changes;
- promoting learning about what is valued as change by individuals and organisations involved in the Learning to Learn project;
- collecting data about the impact of the project as a whole – data which captures ‘thick description’ and complexity that accompanies change.

We also identified a number of questions about the extent to which the process could be modified for Learning Circles without losing its integrity. These included:

*Do members of Learning Circles have a choice about whether they want to engage with this process once it is introduced?*

*Can each Learning Circle negotiate the 'how' of the process differently or do we want a common approach?*

*Do we need domains of change? If so would we limit the number? Would we use a modified Delphi approach to ultimately arrive at domains of change that are common across the Learning Circles?*

*When collecting and recording stories in any Learning Circle, does it matter if some domains of change have no stories written against them?*

*How many cycles of storying, reviewing and selecting will we aim for over a year? If more than one how would we stop the process becoming tiresome?*

*Will the wider staffs at schools become involved in the process. If so at what point?*

*Will we want to keep a copy of every story for secondary analysis at a later point?*

## **2. Implementing/Trialing the MSC process**

With these differences and questions in mind, we developed an overview of key steps in the process and the rationale for each one. This overview can be seen in Appendix 1.

### **2.1 Introducing the Process**

We used the overview, together with the article by Dart et al (2000), in the initial Learning Circles as a basis for introducing the process, seeking agreement to trial it in Learning Circles and negotiating steps with participants. At each of the three Learning Circles at which we introduced the process most participants responded positively to the idea of using a number of Learning Circles to trial it. We stressed that participants would still be able to use Learning Circles for other purposes relevant to their role as change leaders, and that we would negotiate each step of the process to suit the needs and levels of comfort of Learning Circle members. The process that followed, and which encompassed our negotiated versions of the first five steps outlined earlier, consumed the major portion of Learning Circles in the first three terms of the year (six for each group).

One of the early debates we had had in our attempts to interpret the process was whether or not the domains of change against which participants would write should be imposed to match the needs of the project for particular kinds of evidence for accountability purposes (as they were in Davies' work in Bangladesh). Because we wanted to prioritise the learning inherent in the process, we decided that participants would find the domains more meaningful if they were arrived at by participants in each of the three Learning Circles based on their experiences of significant change through involvement in the Project. We offered each group the option of arriving at domains through use of a modified Delphi technique (as used by Dart et al, 2000) or waiting until the first round of stories had been written and using those to infer the domains. All groups opted for the latter option. It was decided that each participant would attempt a story about significant change and bring it to the following Learning Circle. Stories would be written against two of the questions used by Dart et al: *What happened? Why do you think this is a significant change?*

### **2.2 Establishing Domains of Change**

At the next Learning Circle most participants (including each of us) arrived with copies of their stories to distribute. There was a wide interpretation of 'story' and content, with some schools groups arriving with charts or posters which represented their whole change journey

to date, and some stories about changes that occurred before involvement in the Learning to Learn Project.

We had devised a reasonably elaborate process for reading the stories and categorising them into domains, which involved each person reading and identifying key themes in three different stories, writing these on 'post it' notes, clustering these in like groups on a white board and engaging in discussion to arrive at a consensus descriptor for each of the groups. Each participant then placed his/her story in a particular domain. This process was time consuming, taking the whole of each Learning Circle and the discussion to reach consensus became bogged down in one Learning Circle and had to continue into the next one. Eventually the following domains of change were identified (as well as a fourth domain of 'Other'):

*South West Learning Circle*

*Thinking and beliefs*

*Learning culture/conditions*

*Processes/practices/outcomes*

*Secondary Learning Circle*

*Empowerment of students*

*Teachers' professional growth*

*The change process*

*North East Learning Circle*

*Conditions for deep learning*

*Changes in thinking/understanding*

*Processes*

### **2.3 Analysing stories**

Once domains were established we were unsure of whether participants would want to trial the selection process step in which the stories in each domain are read by all participants, discussed in terms of what they indicate about successful change and then a vote is conducted to find the story perceived as 'the most significant' in that domain. Although some participants had commented on the potential for discomfort in this step, all Learning Circles decided to trial it as a means of focussing attention on what criteria for significant change were valued by individual members and across the group. Participants individually read each story in a domain and recorded the aspects which they considered to be indicative of significant change, then these aspects were shared with others in small groups, and finally each person in the large group nominated the story they felt was most indicative of significant change and why. So, for instance, in the Secondary Learning Circle, the story 'Our Four Thinking Selves ...in the PES English Classroom' (See Appendix 2) was voted as most significant for the domain 'Empowerment of Students' and was selected because it illustrated:

- *change in students' abilities to understand themselves as learners;*
- *change in the form of movement away from a 'score' to learning and sharing;*
- *students' commitment to 'feeling' and sharing the change in themselves as learners;*
- *a countering of the dominant culture of SACE (Secondary Assessment Certificate in Education) Stage 2;*
- *the role of uncomfortable emotions in learning and challenging assumptions;*
- *real improvement in high stakes assessment;*
- *the juxtaposition of accredited and 'real' learning;*
- *that teachers learn from their students.*

## **2.4 Discussion/Interpretation of Stories and Process**

In two Learning Circles there was also time to have a discussion of what we could learn about significant change from the indicators identified. In the North East Learning Circle, the following synthesis of important indicators emerged as well as some provocative statements for further discussion:

Indicators;

- Valuing dialogue in learning relationship
- Tension and discomfort
- Asking questions
- Deconstruction of terms
- Constantly challenge to make things explicit and voice underlying assumptions
- Interrogate own thinking and other people's
- Messiness (learning, unlearning, relearning)
- Create a variety of experiences/opportunities (from which people take different things)

Conversation starters;

- 'There's no learning without squirming'
- 'You don't need trusting relationships for learning to occur!'
- 'There's a fine line between control and scaffolding'
- 'Only the learner can decide what's significant'

In the South West Learning Circle, one story, Angelica's Story (see Appendix 3), had been written from the perspective of a child based on the child's verbal responses to questions posed by one of the participants in the Learning Circle. It was perceived as so powerful that a decision was made to begin the next Learning Circle with a closer examination of it. This discussion, in small groups and followed by a report back, gave rise to a rich record of criteria for significant change in the domain 'Processes/practices/outcomes' (See Appendix 4). On further analysis, the following four criteria for significant change have been identified;

- Shift in thinking/worldview
- Whole School level
- Enhancing Teacher Capacities
- Enhancing Student Capacities.

Having trialed the first five steps of the process (i. e. one complete round of taste-testing the process, identifying domains, writing stories against them and selecting and discussing the stories most indicative of significant change in each one) and with each group having only one Learning Circle remaining for the year we faced the question: *Where to from here?* At that time DECS in South Australia had underdone a major restructuring resulting in the reallocation of much of the funding for existing projects. Although the Learning to Learn Project had been allocated ongoing funding it was felt that it was important that it be able to provide evidence that it was making a difference, particularly in terms of changed practice and student outcomes. Some members of Learning Circles had indicated that they would be interested in writing another story now that they had a better understanding of the process, so we decided to ask for a further round of stories in the remainder of the year. However, this time, we decided that it was important to include domains that were congruent with both school and system priorities. The domains specified for the next round of stories were: student engagement; teacher/leadership engagement; whole school reform; student outcomes; and classroom pedagogy.

## **3. Evaluating the Process**

At the end of the first round of trialing we asked participants to complete a short written survey to provide feedback on their engagement in the process by addressing the questions:

- *What have been the most useful aspects of the MSC process? Why?*
- *What have been the least useful aspects of the process? Why?*
- *How could the process have been improved?*
- *Have you used the process with anyone else? If so how did you use it?*

The survey indicated that participants responded very positively to the trialing of the process. They perceived the process to have considerable value as a means of promoting reflection and learning and identifying and recording significant change. In addition, they recognised its potential for engaging other stakeholders in meaningful debate.

### **3.1 Promoting reflection and learning**

Most participants indicated that involvement in the process had helped their learning. They felt that the process provided time in which they could reflect on, write about and discuss what they perceived to be significant change, indicators of learning and the conditions related to learning and educational change;

*Identifying the changes that have happened. Identifying the characteristics that have made the change incident significant. Reflecting on the changes that have happened, recognising them publicly and analysing the conditions, resources etc that have supported us to be successful.*

*Writing the stories, sharing the stories and identifying what was learnt about significant change. Writing clarified some of the significant learning from the project and the discussion highlighted many characteristics of positive change and the conditions that support it.*

Specific comments were made about the role of the process in clarifying and challenging thinking and assumptions, identifying changes in thinking and making values explicit. It was seen to have potential as a powerful metacognitive process. These comments are typical:

*Learning tool – (a) powerful way to capture events, moment. (It) provided a platform for open-ended conversation about what we valued and insights into the thinking underneath the event*

*It allowed time for deep conversations (we chose to do it pairs?) Revisiting the new information and knowledge which has helped our site to become a Learning Community. Information which challenged our old paradigm of learning and (caused us to) view learning from a more powerful and inclusive way.*

*It promotes a metacognitive approach to thinking about your own learning as a process.*

### **3.2 Identifying and Recording Significant Change**

A number of participants also commented on the value of the process in enabling them to develop a written record of their learning. For instance, one wrote:

*A great way to focus reflection and then to stand back and look at distance travelled – ‘a change pedometer reading’*

Another felt that the process of recording learning ‘provides further direction for ongoing learning.’

One participant reflected on the value of the stories produced in providing a counter discourse to that of objective measurement:

*It captures things that matter instead of making what is measurable matter.  
It uncovers the story beneath the numbers and values teacher perceptions. It values the narrative and is non judgmental.*

### ***3.3 Engaging Other Stakeholders in Meaningful Debate.***

An exciting aspect of the trialing was that most participants felt the process was well worth engaging in with other stakeholders. Some had already used a version of the process with groups of staff in learning teams, performance meetings or district groups, and one school leader was planning to use it with the whole staff on a student free day. Some participants had used it with students, and others were planning to.

In the remainder of this paper we depict some of the tensions, dilemmas and challenges that were encountered as we tried to interpret the process in Learning Circles.

#### **Tensions, Dilemmas, and Challenges in interpreting the process in Learning Circles**

In interpreting the process over the year a number of tensions, dilemmas and challenges arose for us as facilitators and for participants in the Learning Circles. These were:

- achieving a balance between scaffolding the process for Learning Circle participants and allowing it to evolve to meet the needs of each group;
- trying to write about significant change;
- maintaining a strong focus on participants' learning about change while also providing accountability data about the success of the project.

#### ***Balancing scaffolding and evolution***

As facilitators of the Learning Circles we felt that we had responsibility for introducing the MSC Process and scaffolding its implementation in ways that were time efficient and allowed for busy school leaders to easily access it and interpret it productively both in the Learning Circles and at their sites. However, we were also aware that the decision to use the process had been made at the project management level with little consultation of sites and included in their Service Agreements for 2003. Although we considered Learning Circles to be logical vehicles for interpreting the process we were very aware that by suggesting they be used for that purpose we could be seen to be hijacking agendas that previously had been negotiated by participants. We were unsure of how to respond if participants rejected the suggestion of trialing the process and so were very relieved that when we introduced the idea in the first Learning Circle this year, participants could see its potential as a learning tool and as a means of documenting important changes at their sites.

However, for us ongoing tensions continued to be the extent to which we should provide structures to scaffold each step in the process and how to ensure that Learning Circles were still prioritising the interests and needs of the participants. We felt that it was important to carefully plan and document, prior to the Learning Circles, structures to facilitate the following steps of the process: 1) introducing the process, 2) establishing domains, 3) analysing stories, 4) selecting the 'most significant' stories within each domain and 5) synthesising learning about significant change. However, we presented these structures as suggestions only, and were open to modifications suggested by participants.

Despite these precautions, there were times when we felt, in retrospect, that the structures we used to scaffold some steps of the process were unnecessarily restrictive. For instance, we felt there were some limitations on the very elaborate categorisation process we used to establish domains, as can be seen from the following comments from one of our debriefing meetings:

*We read three stories each and then we went into the whole categorisation thing. And the stories almost became removed from it all in that when you were doing your labelling etc., you didn't actually know which stories they were. But there was no further discussion of any individual story. ... And in retrospect, once I thought about it, I'm not sure why we came up with such a complicated process. (Debriefing meeting, 7/4/03)*

*But it will be interesting at the end to get people to reflect back on that. About how they felt about that issue. Did they feel that their story that they had put their heart into had due place? Or was that an affirming process? And who did they think was in control? (Debriefing meeting, 7/4/03)*

It was clear from a number of the survey responses that some of the participants were also dubious about some of the scaffolding structures we used:

*Some uncertainty around the purpose in the initial stages.*

*Categorisation using domains of change. How was this useful?*

One of the phases in the process that we were most careful to make optional was that of selecting the story that was most illustrative of significant change in each domain. We were uncomfortable about the notion of having to judge stories and we were aware of the potential for all of us to feel defensive about our stories. Similar concerns were expressed by participants in early Learning Circles. When we reached this phase we suggested alternatives such as a general discussion of all stories in a domain to identify and synthesise indicators of significant change but, interestingly, in each Learning Circle the decision was made to trial this step of the process as well. Having trialed it, it was clear from survey responses that some participants were not convinced of the value of this phase. One judged the 'least useful aspect of the process' as, '*Judging whether one incident of change was more successful than another.*' Another recommended, '*Value all stories.*' The value of this aspect of the process was certainly one that we reflected on in one of the debriefing meetings:

*For me, another thing that I feel has been lost in this and it's that tension about going for the most significant story ... as compared to what every story's got to offer. I really liked our process where we took time to look at every single story and in small groups we shared what we thought was important about every single story but all of that was lost once people had to nominate one story and in repeating the process I don't know that I'd go for that, I mean I think there's value in having to say what's most significant because it gives you the impetus to keep talking and talking and talking, but you lose a hell of a lot of important stuff. (Debriefing meeting, 6/8/03)*

Overall, although there were some aspects of the process, as we interpreted it, that we considered could be improved in future attempts, we were satisfied that we needed to 'have a go' in order to unleash its potential:

*It's a process that you have to experience to feel your way forward in and then once you've had a first round, then you can see how you can take it potentially into much more powerful ways of using it. (Debriefing meeting, 6/8/03)*

### ***Trying to write about significant change***

We knew from previous experience in school-based projects and other collaborative university-school research that busy educators do not always see writing as the most efficient use of their time so we were aware that this might prove to be a tension in introducing a writing-based process. In actuality, all participants embraced the idea of writing the stories with enthusiasm and the majority turned up with completed stories at the designated Learning

Circle. We speculated in a debriefing meeting that one factor in our enthusiasm for what is sometimes an onerous task was the brevity of the proforma we modelled from Dart et al's (2000) example:

*Because you could see actually that you could contain it. You know how ...people get really overwhelmed almost at the thought of it. But you can contain it. You could have one staff meeting and get people to sit down, have a wine and write a story and then start the sharing. And it could actually be very easily contained. I think that's the advantage of it. (Debriefing meeting, 7/4/03)*

There were, of course, some feelings of anxiety about writing. In our role as facilitators, and not being based in project schools, we each agonised over what we could write about significant changes from our involvement in the project.

*Because what I found was that, and a lot of people talked about this, was when it came to write the story it was like, what will I write about? Trying to work out what to write about, I found that quite overwhelming. (Debriefing meeting, 7/4/03)*

The surveys indicated some school-based participants were also a little anxious:

*Some people at our site felt challenged and even threatened by the 'story' process. However they produced some great stories.*

*Moving beyond anxiety about writing or sharing most innermost thoughts.*

When we introduced the process in Learning Circles we did not have time to discuss at length the format and composition of the stories which meant that there was considerable variation in interpretation.

*And I guess the only issue...was that there were some dissidence about what a story was. And I don't know what conversations were had with them before but people had different interpretations of what constituted a story. A chart or a poster. (Debriefing meeting, 7/4/03)*

*Because it was the first time we'd been through the process we didn't really know, and obviously the instructions if you like weren't really clear at the beginning ... some people wrote about things not connected to learning to learn, others tried to capture the holistic picture whereas of course what we wanted was, a change story, one small thing and then talking about why it was but very few people actually looked at the why. (Debriefing meeting, 6/8/03)*

The variation occurred because some participants felt that it was too early in the project to be able to describe significant changes and so wrote about a number of things that were happening in the school or about changes they'd been involved in that were not associated with Learning to Learn. Some tried to capture the 'big picture' of everything that was changing in the school, rather than focus on one significant change. One of the survey responses commented on the difficulty of isolating one significant change within the complexity and chaos of a change journey:

*Because at that moment you are at some sort of end point, whatever that end point is at that moment, and then someone is asking you to describe how you got there...Or pick out the significant bit about how you got there. And how do you pull out one piece out of a whole. I find that hard.*

Another indicated a concern that the desire to write a 'good' story might result in one that conveyed a falsely positive view of events:

*Underlying perceptions (personal) of what should be in a story. This impacts on honesty and true challenging/identification of personal behaviour/improvement agenda.*

As a result of the variation that occurred in the first attempt, one of the recommendations that came out of the surveys of participants was: *More discussion at the beginning about what constitutes a story.* Another wrote: *I'd like a better example to read than the dairy one.* This was a reference to our initial use of an example taken from Dart et al (2000).

Our collective decision to write stories first and identify domains from them was also an aspect that some thought could be improved by a more rigorous approach:

*Establish the domains that are important to schools and the project and write against them i.e. some might be imposed.*

*... perhaps unpacking what we think the elements of the domains might be before writing then reading with these and looking for the elements (plus more) so the dialogue might be richer.*

A further issue for some participants was that, despite our best intentions, stories were rarely written in time to be distributed for reading before the Learning Circles, which meant they had to be read and discussed within limited time constraints. Some participants found this frustrating and a hindrance to in depth analysis:

*Not having the stories to read before the meetings (apologies from me for not always attending to this).*

*I needed more time to read and unpack the domains, the elements. I don't think having an expectation that work will be done away from the L2L Circle is an unreasonable request.*

*Time to reflect and absorb the stories.*

Another aspect of the story writing, and related discussion, was that it was difficult to provide enough contextual information to make the story meaningful to those unfamiliar with the context. One survey respondent suggested we needed to build in '*more time to discuss contextual issues*'.

Despite most of us feeling that there were ways we could improve the story writing aspect in our next attempt, participants were universally positive about the benefits of writing stories and reading each other's stories as can be seen by the following examples from the survey responses:

*For me 'Forcing' the writing aspect (was the most useful aspect) because it is much easier to talk/discuss/dialogue and for your thinking not to be clear, perhaps as when you have to put pen to paper & force your thinking to be cogent, especially on one page – what is it you really believe stuff.*

*Accessing others' stories – hearing what is possible and what had occurred at other schools, provides inspiration, motivation and reasons for further reflection. Then the conversations, discussions, clarifications and learning that have followed have significantly contributed to my learning and understanding, clarifying what is significant and why.*

### ***Balancing learning and accountability***

When we initially introduced the MSC Process at the beginning of 2003, we emphasised that it's main role was as a tool for learning but that it could serve a secondary role of providing useful data to illustrate the positive impact of involvement in the project:

*I think in our first conversations we were talking about this as having some sort of structured process where we could get deeper into our thinking about change and learning and what does make a difference and ... so we always talked about it as more of a learning process and outcome stuff was incidental to the process. (Debriefing meeting, 6/8/03)*

It was for this reason that we made the decision to derive domains from the stories, rather than impose domains that would be most useful for collecting data about the impact of the project. The domains that emerged from the first round of stories (detailed earlier) focused very much on change at the level of personal thinking/understanding and beliefs, and changes in the learning culture conditions in sites. Changes in processes/practices/outcomes only appeared as a domain in one Learning Circle, while one other domain focused on changes in student empowerment. These domains provided an interesting insight into the kinds of changes that occur in the early stages of reform, and also into the amount of time needed before change becomes evident in individual or school-wide practice and in student learning outcomes. It was clear that having only been involved in the project for less than a year, the focus of change was on 'changing hearts and minds' (Peters, Dobbins & Johnson, p. 52) as the basis for later changes in practice. In our debriefing meetings we reflected on the importance of this step:

*And somehow for me this process has the potential for people to unlock that business of recognising they teach from who they are. In a sense I don't find it a concern that they are talking about changed thinking. What I would like to see flowing from that is some sort of recognition of how your previous thinking might have influenced the way you operated. And then how your changed thinking might have influenced the way that you operate. And how that might influence outcomes for students. (Debriefing meeting, 7/4/03)*

*That's a significant message, that you can change structural things, you can give people packages, you can give them new strategies to use in their classroom, but unless they can challenge their mental models in a way that really shakes the foundations of their world view and the paradigms they're working through then no change will happen. So I don't see that as a problem actually at all. (Debriefing meeting, 6/8/03)*

However, as the year progressed there was increasing pressure at the system level for the project managers to provide convincing data that showed the funding provided to the sites had resulted in improvement in areas prioritised by the state government: retention, absenteeism, teacher morale and student learning outcomes, especially in literacy and numeracy. We realised that, if possible, it would be important for the next round of stories to be written against domains that reflected both the priorities of the funding bodies and those of the participants:

*So really in the end we want some powerful stories about what teachers perceived to have changed in students through the changes of Learning to Learn. (Debriefing meeting, 6/8/03)*

However, we were anxious about the extent to which we should impose the domains on Learning Circle participants:

*The dilemma I'm having at the moment is about giving them the domains that now you're wanting which is about affecting student outcomes or change factors and getting them asking for specific stories about those. I think that could be really powerful but I don't know whether it's right to enforce that or not. (Debriefing meeting, 6/8/03)*

In Learning Circles, our anxiety was alleviated when some participants expressed concern that the first round of stories might, in fact, be prejudicial for the project because they would reinforce the view that it was not achieving change other than at the level of thinking:

*The (Learning Circle) group in the end talked about their concern about this being data collection for the system. In that they think it could contribute to ... Learning to Learn (being seen as) 'navel gazing' (because) three quarters of the stories were about changed thinking and not a lot were about action. So people were concerned that this data might confirm some of the concerns about the project overall. (Debriefing meeting, 4/7/03)*

Our perception was that most participants felt ready to write stories that were more in line with system expectations of reform:

*At the end of the first round, there was a very strong feeling amongst the group that having been through it once, we now know what it looks like and we now know that having a political purpose for it, we now have a clearer picture of what sort of stories are going to be useful. (Debriefing meeting, 6/8/03)*

At the time of writing this paper we are eagerly awaiting the next Learning Circles in which these stories will be analysed and we look forward to sharing the outcomes in a later paper.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the MSC process had considerable value as a learning tool for all of the educators involved in the Learning Circles. It enabled participants to reflect on their learning as a result of being involved in Learning to Learn and to identify and record significant changes. It also enabled participants to engage others in meaningful debates with their colleagues in Learning Circles, as well as with those in their school communities.

The challenge now exists to continue with the process and to maximise its potential for providing useful data to illustrate the positive impact of involvement in the Learning to Learn project.

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## Appendix 1

### ***The Most Significant Change Approach: Summary of the Steps Used by Dart et al (2000)***

These are the steps in the process as they were practised by Dart et al, but we can change aspects to meet our own needs.

<b>STEPS (What)</b>	<b>Why</b>
1. Overview of process/ Taste test	Familiarity Decision making/planning
2. Participants establish four domains of change	Promote ownership of evaluation in terms of addressing <i>felt needs</i>  Domains help to distinguish different types of stories so useful to ensure coverage of multi-faceted nature of change  Domains provide categories which can be easily used in a secondary analysis.
3. Establishing a reference group? (representatives from each project region + project manager)	To capture learning  To encourage adaptation to local conditions  To coordinate process
4. Collecting stories (in writing and verbally)	To identify significant changes within each domain  To document significant changes at the school and project levels
5. Reviewing stories and selecting most significant	To make explicit what individuals and the wider group value as significant change  To broaden understandings of what is seen as significant change in each school, Learning Circle and/or the project as a whole.  To abstract and synthesise common elements of significant change.  To provide a source of evaluation information to stakeholders.
6. Sharing stories with a wider audience	To deepen organisational learning about the changes engendered by the project
7. Secondary analysis of the stories en <i>masse</i>	To identify main themes, difference among stories etc  To theorise about change  For further publication via articles, conference papers

## **Appendix 2**

### **MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORY**

#### *Our Four Thinking Selves ...in the PES English Classroom*

When Simon asked in his exasperated tone, "Have you been to another conference?", I felt crestfallen and angry. That night I worked hard not to justify and rationalise my anger but rather to work at understanding it. Is that what I had been doing? Coming back from all these wonderful Training and Development opportunities and giving my Year 12's their regular methodology injections? If that was the case then they had well and truly overdosed.

Of course this posed a dilemma for me. I wanted to explore thinking styles. I wanted to explore the practical application of the myriad of ideas that Julia Atkin had inspired me with. My Year 12's wanted to do more test essays so that they could face the dreaded end of year exam. They weren't interested in the journey - their focus was on the destination.

It was with trepidation that I persevered. In my journal that night I wrote, "*I almost gave up today. It was difficult to get the students to work in their new groups. They looked so uncomfortable and their conversations were stilted. They were angry about the idea of having to work with students who didn't share the same approach to their learning. They challenged me about the value of such an exercise and [Simon] wanted to know what this had to do with their preparation for the exam.*"

#### **What happened?**

I introduced them to the Four Thinking Selves model. I shared with them my preferred thinking style and what this meant for me in my work. I gave them the opportunity to explore their preferred thinking style and to reflect on what this meant in their work. We explored elements of literature through strategies that enhanced the range of thinking styles and we regrouped so that our study groups were representative of the range of thinking styles. We reflected critically on what was happening in our groups and the impact - both positive and frustrating - that our regrouping according to preferred thinking style was having. One student reflected: "*I hated the idea of working with a group of students I wasn't comfortable with but it was an advantage in the end. In a group I always get nervous because I'm just not an ideas person. I'm good at planning and keeping everyone on track. Because of this I never feel like I've contributed anything much. But in this group where we all knew each other's preferred thinking style some of the pressure was taken off. Roni and Dale came up with stacks of good ideas ..[some potential for conflict] and Helen kept the group balanced. I don't know if she normally does that in her groups or if it was because we expected her to keep that "RED" kind of balance...*"

Perhaps most importantly we stopped at regular intervals and audited which quadrant of the Thinking Model we were working in.

#### **Why is it significant change?**

Perhaps the first question is, "For whom?" There are 2 stories to tell here - my story and the students.

#### **For me**

*Here are the questions I asked myself*

- My preferred thinking style is RED. I wonder if this means that I validate that thinking style more than others in my classroom. What does this mean for my students whose preferred thinking style is GREEN?
- When I programme do I programme for all thinking styles and what strategies do I use to strengthen the individual student's least preferred thinking style?
- What does this have to do with their preparation for the exam? [I had to ask of myself the question that they were asking of me]

The answer to any one of these questions is another whole story.....

### **For the students**

For some students it had significant impact. When Nina, 10 weeks later, said, *"I've finished my Independent Reading Folio but I don't think I've done enough "YELLOW" thinking in it. I need to go back and think about the bigger issues"*, I was ecstatic [ridiculous really since that was my intention].... And Simon, I can't end the story without a word about Simon. He explicitly thought about his four thinking selves as he wrote his Reading Folio. The outcome was 8000 gorgeous words that were testament to his ability to analyse, empathise, infer and plan. How much of the students' success can be attributed to their awareness of their preferred thinking styles and how much is purely their growth as writers and readers over a year of exposure to challenging literature - I don't know. For Simon it was significant. His end of year thank-you card to me said, *"I don't care what mark I get I learned so much about myself and I'm confident in what I can do."* Significant change? For Simon definitely. I can pinpoint the day he started to explore and enjoy the journey. [P.S. He got a perfect score but I think it meant even more to me than it did to him.]

### **What difference will it make in the future?**

Back to my story. It has made a difference to the types of tasks I set my year 12's. I set tasks that challenge them to integrate their four thinking selves. Whereas I have always prided myself on the amount of practice test essays that I give the students to prepare them for the exam, I am more lenient on myself now. I do not feel guilty for spending 2 weeks making short films about 'The Great Gatsby' [maybe a little guilty]. But my journey continues and for a year 12 teacher, like a year 12 student, that journey is sometimes taken in the dark. For now the exam does not loom as large in my mind....and hopefully my students have got it into some sort of perspective with me.

### **Appendix 3**

**Title: “What’s different?”**

*To write this story I had a conversation with Angelica about the changes she has experienced since 2001. She was very clear about the differences she has experienced around managing and initiating her own learning and how she feels about this. In writing this story I have not changed what Angelica shared with me as I believe it demonstrates significant change.*

My name is Angelica.

Today I am in Year 5 and my school day is very different to how it was in 2001 when I was in year 3.

In 2001 I was given difficult contracts to do with a short time span and I couldn’t use other areas of the school for my learning. My contract wasn’t often completed because I found it too difficult. I felt very uncomfortable and unhappy and would get into trouble. I cried a lot and felt worried in class. I didn’t really want to come to school.

Now I feel very safe, happy and the work, which we are given, is just right for me because I get to plan my learning in a learning plan and I feel I can complete the work in the time I am given. It’s still really challenging and I learn a lot and the teacher knows this. An example of this is when I wanted to make an i-movie I found it really challenging but I found out how to do it and it was still fun.

I feel very comfortable and confident with the way my learning is going now. My teacher trusts me to use any area of the school for my learning and I use the class system to go to other areas when I need to.

I have made more friends and I think this is because of the way I am learning. I need to work with different people and I am getting to know other people in the class much better. If I need a quiet place for my learning I go to the Resource Centre.

I value the way my teacher lets us learn because we get to choose where we sit as long as we work on our task.

I feel that I am more in control of what I learn. I feel more mature.

I like the way I am trusted to use the phone, computers, photocopier and cameras for my learning plans and I am now an expert with computers, cameras and other technology. In Year 3 I didn’t know how to use these and I wasn’t allowed to.

I feel excited about coming to school, I love being at school and I don’t want to stay at home if I am a bit sick.

I feel like I take more responsibility for my own learning.

**Comment:**

Angelica has experienced two quite different styles of teaching in the past 3 years. The first a traditional one, familiar to us all, with the work and the environment determined by the teacher.

Angelica now plans and manages her own learning.

Her sense of empowerment is obvious.

## **Appendix 4**

### **South West Learning Circle – Responses to Angelica’s Story (14/8/03)**

Criteria indicating significant change

#### ***Shift in thinking/worldview***

- A shift towards the idea that every adult in a school has a duty of care for every child.
- Shift in power/control away from teacher and shift in world-view.
- Learning stems from student’s experiences (as opposed to old teacher-imposed topics and themes).
- Teachers need to believe they have responsibility for all students’ learning (not just own class).

#### ***Whole School Level***

- Common understanding of teacher and learner.
- Need for sound philosophy and theory around that (for learners and teachers).
- For sustainability need change in whole school culture and structures.
- Learning environment that is comfortable and safe but challenging.
- Student initiated learning requires a shared philosophy.
- Management of resources needed eg structural and cultural change to facilitate changed practice.
- Impact on how roles are interpreted eg that of Teacher Librarian.
- Importance of teaming structures in school so people are moved along by each other.
- Talk, discussion, moderation, interaction among teachers to get change happening.
- Self initiated learning can be inclusive of all students if managed well
- Affective dimension is powerful eg relationships in which there is trust in the positive intent of others, feeling safe and happy, student feeling trusted by teacher.

#### ***Teacher Capacities***

- Student experienced a change in practice (so people need to have experienced change – has to make a difference to students)
- Student having control of learning and choice.
- Teachers able to identify and communicate about what students can do.
- Balance student initiated learning with explicit teaching in response to students’ needs (not laissez faire)
- Self-awareness, critical reflection by teachers needed for growth.
- Changed methodologies.
- Change in student’s engagement levels from year 3 –5.

#### ***Student capacities***

- Student aware of own feelings eg feeling empowered.
- Student able to articulate (identify) what is different.
- Students know about the development of thinking skills and learning styles (eg how to use scaffolding to advance own learning).