Building team culture: Reflection in action

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How are discussions of learning to be effectively structured within the daily busyness of school life? How are individual interests to be supported, while at the same time developing a common language and culture of learning? What is the role of leaders within reflective groups?

Two schools, two kinds of teams, two kinds of reflective structures, and two sets of purposes. In what ways does the common framework assist in facilitating conversation across the programs, so that we can learn and move forward?

Paper Two

How can thinking dispositions provide a framework for teachers to reflect on the intellectual story within their classroom?

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Our involvement began with an Integrated Arts program – Arts Ventures involving teachers of dance, music and visual arts. They are a dynamic team of which all are passionate about the Arts and the Arts Ventures program. The program provides an opportunity for students to explore how the various forms of Art i.e. music, dance and visual art use symbolic language. Students learn to interpret symbolic language and are asked to produce pieces of work that integrate the Arts as a communication statement.

In reflecting on this study I decided that it would be useful to contrast my workings with this team and another team that I felt was more successful. The other team was a Renaissance working party where we were reviewing a thematic program and developing a trans-disciplinary unit. This was a larger team consisting of eight staff members across learning areas. These staff had been asked to be representatives of the learning areas. In comparing these two groups I have examined Ron Ritchhart’s theory and examined how thinking dispositions and intellectual character can be applied to professional learning.

Arts Ventures discussion begun by using the values and beliefs framework to identify the core values and beliefs inherent in the program. The next stage was reflecting on students work. Looking at how they interpreted symbolic language within the communication posters, we needed to ask: what were the students doing? were they trying to be reflective or strategic in their thinking? It seemed to me I was wasting staff time and suggested that we develop outcomes as rubrics to be able to assess the communication posters with some consistency.
This meeting had less of a clear outcome and I began to be concerned again about efficiency of staff time and how the theory could assist practice. This was compounded by the fact that it was report writing time, and preparations for the school musical were beginning. I questioned whether holding such meetings were valuable given the commitments of the staff involved. Being in a new leadership role contributed to my anxiety about how I was perceived and expectations that others would have.

Yet it was interesting that throughout the rest of the year conversations with regards to Arts Ventures occurred within the staffroom. Staff members discussed new grouping techniques and how the students and themselves enjoyed the practical making of the installations. They asked questions regarding practical decisions students were making in translating narrative into symbolic language. I attended presentations and could see that the staff members involved were consistently reflecting on their practice and collaborating.

On reflection my expectations of a tangible outcome from each meeting were too high. I needed to have greater confidence in questioning and discussing theoretical underpinnings of teaching and learning. Timing of these discussions was also not ideal. I initially wanted to achieve too much too quickly and scheduled meetings too close together. I didn’t provide time for reflection or slow thinking (Claxton, 2002). The purpose of these discussions was to changed the way we look at what is happening in the classroom, and this needs time.

Ron Ritchhart (2002) in his book *Intellectual Character* found that when examining classrooms rich in thinking opportunities they shared three important characteristics.

- They focused on big ideas that were important to the discipline and worth the time and effort the class spent on them.
- The opportunities themselves were engaging to students capturing their interest and attention.
- The opportunities provided the students some degree of autonomy, independence and attention. (pg 148)

I found this useful in reflecting on my work with the Arts Ventures group.

- In my experience possessing little knowledge of the arts discipline made facilitating discussion very difficult.
- I experienced a strong sense of the staff being very skilled and experienced in their fields and felt that the discussion on thinking dispositions was more for my benefit and of no real benefit to them.
- I felt that I learnt much about the discipline knowledge but found it difficult to translate into the language of the thinking dispositions.
- Reflecting back on my discussions I should have spent greater time explaining the thinking dispositions.

In contrast, ‘Renaissance working party’ was a much more successful group. Why might this have been so?

- Personally as a facilitator I felt more at ease. I was focused on big picture questions and how central ideas and outcomes related to various learning areas. I felt more comfortable as the staff in the team were using their discipline knowledge to relate to the established fertile question and central idea. We also had a common language as we developed it initially and in our ongoing discussions.
• The fertile question provided a focusing tool for the team and something to strive towards. It provided the basis for a common language and a foundation to make connections between the learning areas.

The Arts Ventures group, on the other hand, had discipline knowledge, and I had some knowledge of Intellectual Character, but we didn’t have the language in order to connect the two. This meant it was difficult for the staff involved to engage in thinking and dialogue about the intellectual character, as we had no common language.

Ron Ritchhart suggests that through a focus on big ideas, students become clear about the larger purpose of the class and the purpose behind the curriculum. He claims that this makes it easier to engage students in thinking because the work itself on this demands thinking and active exploration. I would suggest the same would be true of staff.

• Focusing discussions around key questions directly relevant to the classroom may have assisted the Arts Ventures discussions.
• Providing greater discussion of the various thinking dispositions and asking the staff to come up with their own personal wonderings about the thinking dispositions and their work in the classroom.

The meetings in relation to the Renaissance were constantly focused on the big ideas and how students could explore these ideas in a meaningful way. Ritchhart suggests that focusing activities on big ideas in the classroom ensures the thinking connected to these opportunities will be important and worthwhile to students. (2002:148)

I found that when working with the Renaissance group there was a temptation of wanting to look at logistics such as how the timetable looks. This was a source of frustration, as I needed to keep saying it depends on what we want to do to address the big question. What context is required for students to explore the central ideas? Staff found this questioning challenging and in the end rewarding.

Ritchhart suggests that two additional factors related to the actual implementation of thinking opportunities are:

(a) Teachers must provide adequate time for thinking to take place
(b) Thinking needs to be appropriately scaffolded to ensure student progress (158)

Once again I would suggest these are also necessary for teachers, but they are factors which are difficult to address within the business of a school. The interesting thing about the Arts Ventures group is that the initial discussions about reflection and symbolic language continued throughout the course of the year. So, as suggested by Julie Landvogt, often our expectations of achievement within a certain time frame is too high. Perhaps providing small amounts of stimulus material or big questions strategically throughout the year is a more effective approach. This provides opportunities for thinking rather than a reactive response.

Ron Ritchhart states that in thoughtful classrooms, a disposition toward thinking is always on display. I would suggest the same for professional learning. Ritchhart expands on this to say that teachers modelling dispositions such as curiosity, open-mindedness, scepticism, truth seeking, reflectiveness and strategic thinking are important dispositions to model in the classroom. He suggests that they establish tone and expectations for thought and inclination towards thinking. Parallels could be drawn to facilitating meetings. Modelling and making the thinking explicit helps develop a common language and provides a lens of noticing in the
classroom. This does not have to be contrived and Ritchhart suggests that contrived modelling is useful for developing ability but is weak in developing sensitivity and inclination. Ritchhart suggests that spontaneous modelling is powerful as it is about sensitising students to thinking by pointing out occasions when particular thinking dispositions are prevalent (pg 162).

- When working with staff making specific thinking dispositions explicit provides opportunities to develop a common language and assists the noticing of teachers within their own classrooms.
- Confusion and lack of understandings of the connections between my study, and the thinking dispositions are part of the journey regardless of whether you are in leadership or not.

Ritchhart explains that within thoughtful classrooms teachers seek to provide opportunities to experience cognitive emotions. This often means that teachers must first create situations that are complex, ambiguous and challenging in order for students to experience the transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension. (pg 166). Ritchhart claims that this experience of cognitive emotion can contribute significantly to student's motivation. Whilst I had no concerns about the staff’s motivation that I was working with perhaps reflecting on this would have eased my own anxiousness. Once again extending the time frame would have provided perhaps an opportunity and time for reflection to be able to do this. I also believe that with the Renaissance group I worked with there was a degree of cognitive emotions and we wrestled with the realisation of the big ideas and resisted talk about timetables. From emails received from staff during the process of development and sense of achievement afterwards, I would suggest that there was a great sense of a transition from puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension.

In summary, although the intended goals of identifying intellectual character within the curriculum may not have been fully realised, much has been learnt about professional learning. Conclusions drawn from the experiences and reading Ron Ritchhart’s theory include:

- Careful planning of meetings considering competing priorities at various times of the year.
- Clear goals or a framework of questions are necessary as a foundation to refer to.
- Professional learning is a journey for all that relies heavily on reflection.
- Have confidence in questioning theory and practice as it provides foundation for what you do.
- Be careful about setting too high expectations of outcomes
- Common language is Important when working with staff.

Where to next

- I am still interested in working with staff and Intellectual Character and whether the framework is useful in providing a language to describe the understandings and thinking
- Continue exploring ways in which the thinking dispositions can be applied to professional learning within the school setting.

Reference:

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Building Teams: Reflection in action

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Background

MLC is a large independent girls’ school with enrolments of over 2000 students. The Special Education Department covers prep to year 12. Our work involves programs for students with learning difficulties, hearing impairment, gifts and talents and for whom English is a second language. In a general sense, we work to assist the College to cater for individual learning needs.

Having worked in the area of Special Education for over 20 years, I believe that good Special Education practice involves the following:
- looking closely at individual students and how they learn
- being able to use theories of learning through which to look and communicate about learning.

As with any discipline there is also, of course, important discipline knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and personal and human qualities that contribute to effective teaching in Special Education. But in order to move away from a deficit model of Special Education practice, to focus on what students can do and to help them think and learn effectively, the linking of detailed and particular knowledge about individuals with the more general knowledge of theory is essential. (Atkin, 1996; Munro, 1993).

The department I have led at MLC for the past 5 years has a history of reflective practice, professional reading and practitioner research. We have a history of reading theory and research, of sharing ideas and experience with each other, of trying new things and reflecting on practice. This has partly evolved because of the commitment to the principles I have just identified but also because it fits so naturally with elements of good special ed practice. When you focus on individuals, focus on the process of learning, use case studies to share knowledge (Shulman, 1992), ideas and challenges and seek student feedback as part of evaluation and assessment you are engaging with many key aspects of reflective practice. Perhaps these practices also have considerable overlap with qualitative research methodology.

The Ithaka Project: what is in it for us?

The difference with our involvement in a project such as this one, the Ithaka Project, and our regular practice, is that it is based around a particular theory – that of Intellectual Character and the thinking dispositions. Such a basis will add rigour to the process and offers enormous scope and potential for improving our work – which is ultimately about helping students to think and learn better. It creates the opportunity to use a common language through which we can grapple with and explore the complexities of teaching and learning and find a way of making the invisible “stuff” that is at the heart of learning more visible, the implicit more

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explicit. My hope is that it will encourage further development of a reflective culture and move it to the next level. Ultimately it is about thinking about what we do and getting better at what we do.

Method: what do we do?

- We read and discuss theory; we do this within the department, within the College and with the other schools in this project.
- We try to link theory and practice.
- We try to critique the theory
- We develop case studies and try to think about the challenges associated with student learning through the frame of IC and the thinking dispositions,
  
  eg. The very bright student who lacks strategic, planful thinking and perseverance - not uncommon for very bright students for whom much school learning has come easily.
  
  eg. The year 9 student who has a genuine interest in science but whose anxiety about marks extinguishes any real curiosity and potential for deep learning.
- We share reflections with Julie Landvogt and others in the department and the project.
- We trial new strategies and techniques (assessment rubrics using the thinking dispositions)
- We make a deliberate effort to use the language with staff and students.

  eg. Celebrating the achievements of a student with severe learning disabilities in terms of her capacity for strategic and metacognitive thinking: she has learned to look at a task, understand what is required, plan how she is going to do it, organise what she is going to need, what assistance she will require, from whom, anticipate how long it will take and plan accordingly. She will also monitor how she is progressing and adjust her planning if necessary.
  
  eg. Exploring why a year 7 student has shut down to learning; why does she reject offers of assistance? Why does she turn away when the teacher approaches? Why is her thinking so rigid and closed? How can we break through her defensiveness and help her to become more open and flexible in her thinking?
  
  eg. Discussions among staff about the importance of modelling certain types of thinking in relation to certain types of tasks so that students are not only exposed to the way of thinking but also develop awareness and sensitivity about when this type of thinking is appropriate

- We seek student feedback – formal questionnaires, informal dialogue

The conversations happen formally and informally. There are special case study meetings, there are special reading meetings, there are written reflections that are shared and others that aren’t……and there are all the other myriad exchanges of ideas that are part of a teachers work.

What do we mean by change?

My goal, as a leader, is to see changes in practice emerge from the discussions, readings and reflections. Change can be of different kinds;
• sometimes it can involve a new strategy, curriculum innovation, a new set of goals and assessment criteria
• sometimes it can be a tweaking of what we already do eg. describing more clearly something we know intuitively or acting more deliberately in aspects of practice.

But on another level it can also be about a staff member opening up for the first time and sharing with others things that are not working well in her classroom, thereby creating real opportunities to learn from colleagues. It might also be about staff from different departments, with different views on an issue coming together to explore those differences, eg. learning maths in French. It might even be about staff developing the willingness and confidence to contribute more actively to such things as curriculum reviews.

How do we know if this culture is developing?

There are many indicators of whether people are taking on the ideas and whether they are having an impact on practice:
• more discussions about thinking
• language of IC and thinking dispositions seeping into discussions about students and their learning
• requests from staff for more information and reading material
• ideas from the theory appearing in different contexts – eg curriculum reviews, department meetings
• new assessment criteria and practices eg. Rubrics using dispositional language

In order to explore staff perceptions of the project this year I asked the following questions in a Department meeting:

- What has been valuable about your involvement with this project?
- What has been difficult?

With respect to the difficulties the following emerged:
- personal issues impacted on level of involvement
- there was some discomfort with email conversations
- the murkiness of the project was challenging for some
- the issue of the content/focus of the research not always being suitable and that it takes some time to discover this. Eg. class teacher changes, student shuts down, stops coming
- TIME - time with students, time to think, time within the overcrowded curriculum (get the task done or focus on thinking deeply)

However I was deeply gratified to hear the responses about the value to the participants:
“ I’m now focusing more on the process of learning.”
“The focus on thinking is valuable for me – it’s changing my perspective when teaching.”
“I like the reading. I’d never do it if I didn’t have to”
“I like the professional connection with peers that this makes possible.”
“This gives me creative ways to look at the year 9 program”
“I like the way this enables me to move outside the Special Education context.”
“My pre-set ideas are being challenged; I’m looking at learning behaviours and thinking rather than ability.”
"It’s valuable to think about student learning in this way.”

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I’m developing a common language of thinking and learning that I can use with my students.’’

“I like grappling with a new language to describe learning.’’

“I focused on challenging students to see how this theory provided a language for looking at learning.’’

**Challenges**

What I have come to know and has been reinforced by projects such as this is that engaging deeply with ideas such as these is challenging and takes time. The process is not always smooth and not always without conflict.

What I see very clearly is that:

- the everyday constantly interferes with the big picture (people can’t come to the reading meetings because they have to attend chapel with their tutor group)
- people’s personal lives impact on their level of involvement (a child is ill, a marriage breaks up, a child struggles with year 12)

So the business of the school day, the stresses of working in a school, the recognition of the importance of people’s personal lives present particular challenges for building a team culture based on reflective practice. It’s quite difficult to balance the sensitivity and patience that is required as a leader in this sort of project with the need to motivate people, to create the opportunities in the context of very busy and demanding work schedules and to sustain the expectation that people will contribute.

**Implications and further questions: challenges for leadership**

I recognise that deep involvement and change happens when people are focusing on what interests them and what challenges them. This is why many of the special education staff have chosen to focus on problematic/difficult situations from their practice in the project. I can’t help but wonder however, whether some staff have to manufacture such “interest” because there is a strong expectation for this sort of reflection on practice.

- But then again, does it matter if this interest is manufactured?
- Isn’t it my responsibility as a leader of a team to work towards change and improvement?
- And isn’t this expectation for staff involvement part of that responsibility?

I have a strong belief that once people have experienced the benefit of processes like practitioner research, it will become an integral part of the way they choose to work. Once they start to feel more effective as teachers, to understand and be more in control of this complex business of teaching and learning and have access to ways of investigating those things that are challenging and difficult, their practice will change forever. These processes of reflective and critical observation will be seen as part of their work, not an addition to it. The professional learning that can result from a project such as this is the sort of enduring learning we hope to achieve with students; it’s the sort of learning that will set patterns for future learning. So I am happy to keep the expectations high, to gently push and to try and juggle all the things that impact on staff involvement.
I create the space and opportunities for dialogue – formal and informal. I build structures and processes into department practice that encourage the application of theory to practice – case studies, evaluation processes. I try to negotiate for recognition of this sort of practitioner research as professional development. I try to be alert to opportunities to seed the ideas more widely – staff input into curriculum reviews. I try to be sensitive to and recognise people’s own paths with this type of professional learning and I try to do what I am asking others to – to read, reflect, share and write.

References

