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That Feels Real to Me! Using Cases for Professional Learning

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This presentation will discuss a process of collecting, critiquing and employing professional narratives as a means of informing teacher learning in the NSW Department of Education and Training. It will discuss how and why stories, narratives, vignettes or cases can and should be used as a professional learning tool; what it is that makes them so potentially powerful and compelling. Narrative inquiry can be a potent means of understanding professional practice for narratives are one of the chief means by which we make sense of the world. It is a legitimate, rational form of knowing. The intellectual act of making meaning from events, as told in a narrative form, can lead the knower to reconstruct and reconceptualise previously held beliefs and understandings. However, this cannot occur unless there is some kind of stimulus or trigger that will render the narrative problematic. In the project reported here teacher leaders from across the state were gathered together to develop a series of cases directed to issues surrounding developing school professional learning plans. These cases were then subject to critique, refined, developed and trialled. The presentation will report upon all phases of the study.

The Case for Cases in Professional Learning:

In 1653 Izaak Walton wrote in *The Compleat Angler or The Contemplative Man's Recreation*, "Angling may be said to be so like mathematics that it can never be fully learnt". If he were writing today he may very well have substituted 'teaching' for 'mathematics' for that enduring professional practice may also never be fully learnt. It is an art and skill that continually grows and changes as we come to know and understand more and more about what it is to learn and how it is to teach. Teaching, well done, is

itself learning. Grundy & Robison (2004) in reporting upon recent trends in Australian teacher professional development commented:

Teaching is forever an unfinished profession. Thus, professional development is intrinsic to the vocation of teaching. By its very nature, teaching is never complete, never conquered, always being developed, always changing. Far from signalling some flaw, the centrality of development to the profession of teaching should be viewed as a badge of honour. (p. 146)

The good teacher is ever alert to what it is that he or she needs to know so that he or she may continually grow and develop. As the General Teaching Council of England puts it:

Learning is an integral part of professional practice and the means by which teachers rejuvenate their practice on a daily basis in their desire continuously to extend themselves and their pupils. (GTC, 2002, p.1)

Much teacher learning occurs serendipitously, around the photo-copier, in the staffroom, even over a glass of ale at the local pub. Stories are told, events are unpicked, strategies shared. However, not all learning is good learning – one may learn how to survive rather than how to professionally thrive. Duncombe & Armour (2004) make a distinction between collaborative opportunities for teacher professional learning and everyday discussions. Experience swapping, sympathy and support may not, of themselves, be productive in enhancing teacher learning. The stories shared between teachers may “need to be told and retold in different ways and with different emphases in order to meet teachers’ different learning needs” (p. 146).

So how and why should stories, narratives, vignettes or cases be used as a professional learning tool? What is it that makes them so potentially powerful and compelling? At the beginning of the nineteen nineties Connelly and Clandinin (1990) drew our attention to ways of engaging with narrative inquiry as a potent means of understanding professional practice. Building on their work O’Loughlin (2000) believes that narratives are the chief means by which we make sense of the world. Wearmouth (2003) drawing upon the writing of Jerome Bruner, has pointed out that narrative knowledge is a legitimate rational form of knowing. The intellectual act of making meaning from events, as told in a narrative form, can lead the knower to reconstruct and reconceptualise previously held beliefs and understandings. However, this cannot occur unless there is some kind of stimulus or trigger that will render the narrative problematic.

So to leave the power of narrative at just that – the capacity for storytelling – is itself too simple for the purposes that are identified in this paper¹. The real power lies in the

¹ This paper draws upon a series of exhibits contained in the DET Corporate Learning Portfolio *Beyond Shadow Play*. A corporate learning portfolio has been defined as: evidence based documentation of organisational and collegial learning regarding a workplace’s transformation. (Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2003 p. 36) In this project it has been used as the principal means of archiving the learning of the Professional Learning and Leadership Development Directorate of the DET.

interrogation of the story. Few of us are satisfied if someone merely tells an anecdote and leaves it with no subsequent interaction. Instead we seek to link the story to events in our own lives, in this instance our professional lives. We find ways of empathising with this protagonist and seek to question the actions of that person. We engage in dialogue about the behaviour of one person or another or ask ourselves new and different questions about the context. Of course this varies according to the medium. The verbal story, one which is told and therefore can be interrupted, is different from that which is written and thus fixed on the page. The cases that are to be reported upon here, and the writing of them, are not only fixed on the page, but are purposeful and have been developed to be provocative and stimulate dialogue. Cases also need to be seen as authentic, providing a touchstone in terms of the lived life of schools and classrooms. Ackerman, Maslin-Ostrowski & Christensen (1996) have argued that the process of constructing cases can be one which “promotes an atmosphere of trust and a sense of participation and well being. We are one another’s best teachers” (p.23).

If we are to use the power of narrative to develop an enhanced capacity to solve professional problems in the dilemmas ridden environment that is schooling, then we need to have some terms of engagement which will permit rigorous and illuminating debate. While their work was with children and young people Barter & Reynold (2000) provide a useful and interesting insight into the use of vignettes within quantitative and qualitative research traditions. They see vignettes as stories that provide tangible examples of people, their behaviours and events that participants can evaluate and comment upon. In some research contexts that commentary would follow a range of questions in a pre-determined category, but as well it is feasible that respondents may be asked to be rather more speculative, imagining what it is that they might do in reaction to the scene that has been set. Indeed, Barter and Reynolds suggest that an element of ambiguity is both necessary and desirable.

Many professional groups, such as education, medicine, law, social work and engineering have been using cases not only to illuminate specific instances, but also as a catalyst for engaging in problem solving (Ewing & Smith, 1999). The strategy being reported upon here is one that not only examines the use of the case, as a tool for learning; but also the development of the case itself through a rigorous set of processes.

As far back as 1986 Shulman was arguing for the use of cases as a means for initial teacher education students to develop problem solving skills. He proposed that there are four fundamental elements which underline the approach. These are summarised and elaborated thus:

1. Those studying the cases are expected to be actively involved in their own learning and to develop questions and strategies which are relevant to them.
2. Those studying the cases are encouraged to work collaboratively and use the synergy of the group, not only to support each other in complex analyses, but also to challenge each other’s interpretations, ideas and professional knowledge.

3. Reflection is a basic tool for the examination of cases. Those studying the cases are expected to carefully weigh the case elements and focus on both their own beliefs and experiences, and on the context in which the case is situated.
4. Examination of the case is constructed within a given professional field, as a community of practice. Those studying the case should have an understanding and a sensitivity to that professional environment, its tenets and mores.

Shulman's criteria apply equally well to case-based professional learning for experienced practitioners. With this understanding this paper will now turn to the specific application with which it is concerned.

Professional Learning in NSW Department of Education and Training:

In its professional learning policy for New South Wales Department of Education and Training schools (NSW DET Professional Learning Directorate, 2004) it is asserted that:

1. Individuals engage in ongoing professional learning throughout their career
2. Schools include a professional learning component within the endorsed school plan
3. Schools ensure that the professional learning component takes account of the needs of staff and the school community and the priorities of the school and the Department
4. Schools establish a professional learning team to plan and implement and evaluate the professional learning component of the endorsed school plan
5. State office, regions and schools promote and implement quality professional learning in collaborative and collegial environments
6. State office and regions support the professional learning of staff through the development of policy and provision of a range of resources and opportunities
7. State office, regions and schools evaluate the impact of professional learning to inform and improve future professional learning and
8. State office, regions and schools are accountable for the expenditure of funds on professional learning. (pp. 4 – 5)²

The policy is a landmark one, with greater resources being made available to schools for teacher professional learning. However, it is clear from the policy that the ways in which the schools will utilise the resources should accord with overall planning and be the responsibility of a locally based professional learning team. This signals the centrality of leadership within the school whose role will be forming and managing a team who can develop sound and appropriate plans to meet the school's needs given each school's staffing and student profile³.

² Policy documents, guidelines and resource materials for professional learning can be accessed on the Teacher Professional Learning Website at:

<http://www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/TeacherProfLearning/>

³ For resources related to Leadership within the policies of the NSW DET consult:

http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/edu_leadership/ple.index.php

The Project

The project *Leadership for school-based professional learning* was supported by an Australian Government Quality Teaching (AGQTP) program grant. Drawing on the learning from a previous AGQTP funded project to develop the leadership skills of head teachers of Mathematics and English,⁴ this project aimed at building the leadership capacity and skills of school executive in designing and developing a school-based professional learning plan. It is important to note that standards frameworks were utilised to inform the development of cases and professional learning processes. These include: the NSW DET *School Leadership Capability Framework*; the NSW Institute of Teachers *Professional Teaching Standards*. Principles of effective learning also influenced the development of the cases. The project was also conducted in the context of the discussion paper *Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools* (NSW DET, 2003). Just as it is believed that students require a pedagogy that reflects intellectual quality, a quality learning environment and significance so too it is the case the teachers, in terms of their professional learning deserve a similar pedagogy. The elements of deep knowledge, deep understanding, problematic knowledge, higher-order thinking, meta-language and substantive communication are all necessary for teachers to engage with the cases.

The cases and facilitation processes that have been developed have taken into account authentic contexts in which school leaders work, and reflected the complexity of school environments and the uniqueness of teachers' and leaders' work within these environments. The cases themselves are generic, thus allowing users in varying contexts, ranging from regional and remote schools to those located in outer and inner metropolitan regions, to identify the central problem or challenge but locate it within their specific site.

The remainder of this presentation will outline the various phases of the project and some outcomes from each phase. The evidence base is itself archived in the earlier mentioned portfolio; it draws upon observation data, documents, a range of written products and surveys conducted throughout the project.

Project Phase One

In the first phase of the project it was important to begin building a learning community. Regional coordinators from across the State were brought together at a one day workshop as key stake holders in the planning and implementation of the project. It was seen as essential that the coordinators were well briefed regarding the project and its purposes. The enormous potential to link regional initiatives and to support regions in their planning was noted by the regional representatives.

⁴ Information on this earlier project and the current project can be found at <http://www.qtp.nsw.edu.au/flme>

Project Phase Two

Regional coordinators selected school executives with wisdom, knowledge and skills in professional learning to construct cases at a two day residential workshop. Twenty seven school executives including principals, deputy principals, assistant principals, head teachers across K-12 drafted over 20 cases using a constructivist approach. In small groups they drew upon their varied experiences to identify particular challenges and concerns that leaders in schools faced when developing professional learning plans. Using a wide range of communicative strategies each draft case was discussed both within and between groups.

The project team placed particular emphasis on: open-endedness; purposefulness; relevance; coverage; and complexity. It was seen as essential that cases should grow from the lived experience of the participants and provide opportunity for dialogue and debate. It was understood that the cases would be used by school leaders and should also take account of the leadership capability framework.

Particularly it was determined that there should be a range of stimuli that would assist case writers in constructing professional learning as problematic rather than as a script to be followed. Discussion starters included provocative statements; such as; “what was the worst professional learning experience you have ever had”, “why was it the worst”. “If we understand what are good and bad professional learning experiences, then why is it so hard to design good ones?” It was argued that provision should be made for participants to reflect upon the nature of their own professional learning and the ways in which it may or may not have been successful.

The workshops modelled a variety of effective professional learning principles such as immersing participants into a variety of activities to allow them to develop strong collegial links with their group, experience a variety of stimuli in the area of professional learning and leadership, and to develop their own understanding of problems and solutions, and thus construct their own knowledge of a wide range of issues. The workshops were precisely that. They were not lectures or seminars and were perceived by participants as “relevant”.

Professional dialogue and discussion generated from the cases was highly valued. Participants commented that the cases, as they evolved promoted “honest dialogue” and provided opportunities “to develop additional insights and realistic view of skills required for professional learning”. They saw cases as “provocations that will generate authentic reflection and discussion among staff” and allow for “collegial discussions and sharing of ideas”. The cases were viewed as a way of thinking more broadly and of “preventing old answers being applied to new problems”.

Phase Three

By this stage, 18 cases were edited and refined in preparation for the trialling and testing of the cases. The task of the project team was to ensure that each case was distinctive and

clearly expressed. In essence, very few changes were made to those drafted by those who participated in phase two. At a two day residential workshop 24 interregional school leaders of professional learning and regional coordinators: examined the efficacy of the cases that had been developed; provided feedback that would allow the cases to be more finely tuned and adapted; and explored applications in the different social and geographic contexts of the range of schools in the State.

Ten cases were examined. They covered a range of curriculum, pedagogical and management issues; for example: poor preparation and documentation for learning, supporting a new teacher, adjusting to a new executive, labelling and blaming students for lack of achievement through to the development of the school's professional learning plan. An appropriate scaffold for discussion was developed and inclusive facilitation practices were foregrounded.

The discussion of the cases was vigorous and diffuse and opened up a number of issues. A concern that the case based learning approach could become the new orthodoxy was allayed by the team who indicated that the approach itself was flexible and could be used in a variety of ways. While time and opportunity was provided for future planning in terms of ways in which the cases might be used in schools and regions, there was a need to check the capabilities of regions to support and sustain the implementation, particularly for those in isolated rural schools. The time factor was also raised but it was emphasised that this was not to be a "hurried strategy" and that the establishment of a web board would facilitate communication.

During this phase it was seen that the cases would promote professional dialogue and could facilitate schools in considering planning priorities. They were thought provoking and provided sufficient context to be generally relevant across the K-12 range (with some minor exceptions).

Reflection on the Three Phases

The constructivist approach that was used to develop the cases was viewed as a powerful form of professional development and was supported by comments from participants describing the experience: "An excellent professional learning exercise as well as providing case studies for use by others", "Excellent process for generating discussion on a number of levels," "The professional dialogue and value-added to my learning."

Overall it was believed that case-based learning had generated rich professional dialogue, discussion and self-reflection and covered a wide range of problems. Participants commented on "The deep knowledge involved in analysing cases" and the potential to "inspire positive action" to build the leadership skills of school leaders to develop and deliver school-based professional learning.

The approach was seen to apply to real situations with relevant problems and reflected the complexity of schools and of professional learning across varied contexts. Participants acknowledged "The value of the vast array of experiences and expertise" of

those attending the workshop and the relevance of “The human emotion” captured in the cases. Participants commented that cases transcended “school sites, gender and ethnicity” with an ability “to tease out professional learning issues within any school context”.

It was perceived that the cases were a way of applying theory to every day practice for example as a way of applying the NSW School leadership capability framework, the professional learning policy and the NSW Quality teaching framework.

Project Phase Four

At the trialling workshop, regional teams planned for the implementation of the cases in their regional context. Each of the ten regions was funded for a number of days of teacher release and workshop support.

This is a work in progress. The regional implementation is being achieved in a variety of ways: awareness raising workshops for senior regional and school executives; development of workshop materials to train facilitators to support executive development programs; incorporation of case-based learning into existing regional and state programs and in a variety of contexts: Small network of about four schools involved in the writing and trialling of the cases are using the strategy and sharing their learning; individual schools working with the cases and documenting their learning journey; and online learning communities are engaging with the cases.

The project has been a very worthwhile, productive and rewarding professional learning experience from a participant and coordinator facilitator perspective. It was clear from the evaluation feedback that participants had developed a deeper understanding of the merits of case based learning and the power of cases to build leadership capability. It was understood that the processes used during the workshop contributed not only to such an understanding but also to skill building in the communicative processes that would be required during implementation. There were some concerns around the ability of individual facilitators and the ways in which they might be prepared for their role. Feedback from the regions indicated that there is an increasing momentum in their use of case-based professional learning.

The Future

Some thought is already being given to consider ways in which the cases might be expanded to include students’ understandings of their teachers’ professional learning. Focus group discussions have been held in a number of sites where young people have had an opportunity to reflect upon the what and how of their teachers’ practices and skill development (McLelland, 2005; Groundwater-Smith, 2005).

A major outcome envisaged for the AGQTP Leadership for school based professional learning was to investigate case-based learning in a way that builds capability and sustainability in school practice. To assist this process three online subjects have been

developed. The subjects are: An introduction to case-based professional learning; Facilitating case-based professional learning in your school/workplace; Case-based learning: Documenting the journey in my school/workplace. These courses are part of the NSW Department of Education and Training's certificates of professional learning program.

The potential for the delivery of equitable and sustainable quality teacher professional learning lies in exploring the possibilities of online learning. A report, *New Places and Spaces for Professional Learning: An evaluation of Online Case-based professional Learning in Two Context*⁵ examined the trialling of case-based learning with two online learning communities which were part of the project.

It highlighted potential of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) to:

- provide equitable access to quality professional learning to overcome distance especially in rural areas.
- to reach teachers regardless of where they live and work, anytime, anywhere and allows for just in time learning to occur
- provide large numbers of teachers with quality professional learning within a specified time period
- scale up a strategy to provide state-wide access
- create a learning community where teachers have contact with other teachers who share common experiences and goals
- potential to support practitioners across a range of settings with opportunities for a more flexible form of engagement.

and raised issues on:

- maintaining confidentiality
- the importance of constructive responses
- the importance of support and encouragement from leaders
- the need to focus on understanding where different interpretations come from and to make your thinking clear to others "you are what you write"
- for effective communication the need to maintain a critical mass
- using netiquette which does not require new communication skills but an awareness of the constraints online of the E-environment
- showing concern for others where time is limited
- challenges from the reliability of the technology and the web and the importance of maintaining humour

Concluding Comments

The journey involving the construction and use of cases in the context of the NSW state government schools has been rewarding and productive in a number of ways. The project has supported and nourished a range of creative elements in the design of teacher professional learning. It has generated genuine enthusiasm, valuing and commitment for

⁵ Unpublished AGQTP report for NSW DET 2005

the use of narrative for supporting professional learning planning in a structured and meaningful way.

The use of ICT as part of a blended approach with ‘face to face’ contact in the project has been promising gaining the support and commitment of the 10 NSW regions. The regions are being supported to deliver the online case-based courses that developed from the project. Learning more about how teachers engage with case-based learning in online medium will serve to inform not only this initiative but others that will follow.

The process undertaken to construct and implement the cases has reaffirmed the findings in the literature about the power, value and effectiveness of using narrative for teacher professional learning. This work is not complete. Neither is it the ‘latest solution’ that will have its heyday and then pass away. Rather, it is a strategy, a tool, that if used judiciously can make an important and worthwhile contribution to professional learning and ultimately to student learning itself – surely the goal of everyone in the education enterprise.

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