

Sabbatical Report 21C Learning and Implications:

David Reardon, 2009

This is not a journal article. It represents my opinions, reactions and points of note from a wide range of opportunities during the sabbatical period. It has never been my intent to publish a thesis, rather to reflect on our own context and consider next steps for our school. It is for this reason that, at the time of writing, I have more questions than answers, and that our Leadership team at school has some evolving thoughts. Some of this may be considered ramblings.

Thanks to those who worked hard to achieve this opportunity for Principals. It has arguably been one of the most useful experiences to take stock, step back and think about what is of importance, what work is to be done and where my own sphere of influence impacts most. It has also been an opportune time for an Aspiring Leader to step up and take the reins for a term. (And at the time of writing he has won his own position of Principal)

The purpose of the sabbatical leave scheme is listed as 'to provide a sustained period of leave of time as part of a Principal's career pathway to engage in a balance of professional learning, reflection and rejuvenation.' I think I have achieved and enjoyed all of this.

At the time of applying for a sabbatical position, Russell Street School was in the early stages of an EHSAS Cluster programme focused on developing a professional learning community driven by the belief that 'all learners must achieve the highest possible levels of achievement in the competencies that would equip them for success in the 21st century'.

At the time of developing this plan, we were very careful to word this in such a way to reflect that we were already in the 21st century (and that significant changes had already occurred). In short we wanted to recognise that 21st century skills weren't a finite, finished framework. In essence we needed to have a strong 'future focus' in all of our planning and thinking on the basis that this set of skills would continue to morph.

At the time of application we had also developed a charter following extensive consultation with our community, which included meetings in homes and a long period of synthesis. We saw this process of engaging all stakeholders as critical and went to considerable lengths to get our community involved. And the focus? Getting our community, especially parents, to think about their child's needs for the future, not their own, from the past.

Our focus through EHSAS had begun to refine some our plans and sharpen our interest in other such important driving forces, consistent with the notion of a 21C learner and 21C learning. One such example is that of developing the process of teacher inquiry, a framework we now see as critical in enabling the principles, values and vision of our own national curriculum to flourish.

In making best use of this sabbatical, much of my intent, interest and thinking changed. The initial purpose was shaped further by what I was reading and as the term drew to an end I felt that I had not satisfactorily met the initial intent. Never mind, I followed several lines of interest, read several books (some only partially), engaged in reflective chats with colleagues, regularly visited favourite blogs, joined several digital communities and visited several local schools, as well as two days in the northern schools. (Note-These visits reminded me that there are similarities in what we are all setting out to achieve but there is also a very distinct local context to it too). Even at the time of writing I don't feel like I have got it all together but I'm getting there. Thanks to all those who helped shape my current thinking!

And this sabbatical also came at a time when much concern in the air regarding national standards, the shape of them, issues around implementation and the possible tension with the NZ curriculum.

I have subsequently presented to our Board of Trustees around my thinking in the short to mid term. Some of this is outlined here.

In many of the schools I visited there was a strong emphasis on (recently) identifying the values with which they associate and making them explicit.

Competencies were a focus of much curriculum development. Many schools had carried out comprehensive review at several levels and had developed 'plans of intent' giving strategic direction to their management of change process associated with the new curriculum.

Many, if not most schools were of the mind that 21st century learning was about developing critical thinking, problem solving, personal and social responsibility, teamwork, communication, self management, use of technology to name but a few. Reading, writing and doing maths was acknowledged as being more important than ever. I think these are well covered in our own curriculum and we, as a sector, are becoming good about articulating them. Maybe the question I should have asked was what has changed?

I believe that many schools were leaning towards my own perception of today's curriculum. i.e. one that was designed 'just in time'. The needs of students change, opportunities for rich problem based learning can't be planned for over a three-year cycle and above all else, curriculum design and implementation should be responsive to the school inquiry process. So in short any curriculum documentation should be like a wiki, ever changing, always being revised. (Note-this is how we are treating many documents in our school now, allowing on-going editing and revisions of critical material).

For ease I have summarized some of the main points from my professional learning, including reading. I'll try to wrap it all up and bring it together at the end.

In essence our new curriculum is consistent with other models or underlying driving factors in other places. The enGauge Model is in my opinion more centred on requirements in a digi-centric age.

enGauge 21st Century Skills

The enGauge 21st Century Skills were developed through a process that included literature reviews, research on emerging characteristics of the Net-generation, a review of current reports on workforce trends, input from

educators, among other input. In essence it considers what students will require to thrive in the digital age.

In particular I noted the following key points or strands (and usually agreed with them):

- Learning increases significantly when students are engaged in academic study through authentic, real-world experiences;
- The model is based on the assumption that defines literacy as the ability to use 'digital technology, communications tools and/or networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate and create information in order to function in a knowledge society';
- enGuage uses the term 'inventive thinking' on the belief that technology makes the simplest tasks easier and allows more time for higher-level skills. This includes a range of abilities such as adaptability/managing complexity; self management/direction; curiosity; creativity; risk-taking; and higher order thinking and reasoning;
- Has a central theme too of being driven by high output in terms of being knowledge driven;
- We must continually acquire and develop new knowledge and skills. It will never remain static;
- There will be changes to what children learn, but it is equally important to realise the ongoing shifts in how and when they are learning.

I like this reference too: "The sheer magnitude of human knowledge, world globalization, and the accelerating rate of change due to technology necessitates a shift in our children's education from plateaus of knowing to continuous cycles of learning. " (NCREL, 2003, p5) The same applies to teacher education I think.

I read Visible Learning (J.Hattie) quite deliberately. Other than having one of the biggest bibliographies this book has a number of important messages, surprises and challenges, and a number of findings that we would welcome further debate on (such as impact of class size) The main vision of Hattie's work in my opinion is that teachers see learning through the eyes of the

student and when students see themselves as their own teachers.” I quite like this. I also like his statement ‘Don’t Blame the kids’ which I found in another writing of his.

It is worth reprinting the conclusions (recast as six signposts towards excellence in education):

1. Teachers are among the most powerful influences in learning.
2. Teachers need to be directive, influential, caring and actively engaged in the passion of teaching and learning.
3. Teachers need to be aware of what each and every student is thinking and knowing, to construct meaning and meaningful experiences in light of this knowledge, and have proficient knowledge and understanding of their content to provide meaningful and appropriate feedback such that each student moves progressively through the curriculum levels.
4. Teachers need to know the learning intention and success criteria of their lessons, know how well they are attaining these criteria for all students, and know where to go next in light of the gap between students’ current knowledge and understanding and the success criteria of “Where are you going?”, “How are you going?”, and “Where to next?”
5. Teachers need to move from the single idea to multiple ideas, and to relate and then extend these ideas such that learners construct and reconstruct knowledge and ideas. It is not the knowledge or ideas, but the learner’s construction of this knowledge and these ideas that is critical.
6. School leaders and teachers need to create school, staffroom and classroom environments where error is welcomed as a learning opportunity, where discarding incorrect knowledge and understandings is welcomed, and where participants can feel safe to learn, re-learn, and explore knowledge and understanding.

Most influences are positive, but some that we should focus our attention more on, have significant impact. Do our practices at our school reflect these? Generally speaking I do believe so. However we do need to sharpen our

focus on some matters and I intend presenting parts of this to the Board and Staff, as well as weave aspects of it into communication with Parents. What Hattie has written about is not the Holy Grail but it does deserve and needs to be debated.

Surprises -Teacher Subject Matter being so low! As too with Problem Based learning. Pre-term birth weight so high!

My attention became focused around the professional learning of staff and particularly with regards to the process of teacher inquiry. A quick re-read through parts of the 'Best Evidence Synthesis on Professional Learning and Development' heightened for me the need for teachers to become sustaining in carry out robust investigations into the nature or craft of their work. Teachers needed to become more able to make principled decisions about practice and a first step for us may be to determine exactly what each teacher's 'existing theories of practice' are. It is my intention in 2010 to seek this from staff and to continually revise whether this in keeping with our collective goals and well –informed. Upon my return I have managed to meet with each teacher and have him or her share his or her teacher inquiry for the year. They were delighted with the outcomes or improvements in student achievement; I was delighted with the process with which they managed these improvements. It is these processes that we have to strengthen even further as a sector.

Teacher inquiry is about developing a professional mindset of investigating, implementing and reflecting upon that, which matters most –outcomes for children. And in times of rapid change it should be the foundation of a teacher's work.

While not yet a fully committed social networking guru I did, as part of my sabbatical sign up for facebook, twitter and flickr, among others to evaluate their impact on my world (and that of children at or about to start school). Many of today's students are already using these at a very early age outside of the school and increasingly, in school as a way of connecting to friends,

family and experts in their local or the global community. Children now have at their fingertips a virtual world –I wanted a picture of this too –both for the good and bad.

It is true that you become more connected. I hooked up with old friends that I had lost contact with, forged better relationships about some I didn't know so well and found out more about some people than I cared to know. I conservatively participated at first and then as I grew a better understanding of facebook realized that what I was looking for, wasn't really the primary focus of this space. I was looking for professional networks, opportunities and learning, not a social outlet (though facebook can and does forge the former too). So I went in pursuit of professional blogs and have now become a regular reader and contributor to many. This domain is one that I had to do a fair bit of selection around. There are those that I now like to follow and participate with and those that had no impact at all. I guess this is the point – you choose which circles to move in and which conversations you want to be part of. And at different times you join different communities of interest. How did my own (limited) experience shape my thinking around student learning?

First, it did remind me of the enormity and complexity of the networks and connections that even our youngest can have. If this is the case then the question to be answered is 'How can we harness this capacity to promote better learning?' In our case we have already introduced class blogs and e-portfolios in several classes, and while my own experience helped to heighten the potential, I believe we have some further work to do, especially in educating those that don't have the language of learning. We as educators need to get in touch with this world first hand if we are able to design and evaluate learning that utilizes its potential.

The second point that really stuck out for me is that we can harness the idea that children are not just recipients but also contributors. i.e. they should be sharing their knowledge as part of the collaboration that the web 2.0 world enables and not simply being a passive reader. There is huge scope for leading this too.

So, where to from here for us/me? We need to keep pace with the advances in technology, changes in society and in keeping with an evidence base. To give our children the best chance for success in the future we also need to:

- educate the community about the underlying driving forces of a 21st century curriculum (and especially important in our school in light of the national standards debate?) We need to utilize the 'Meet the Teacher' evening to relay some of these messages and move to greater electronic communication (not have a paper newsletter?). We may need to pressure parents into moving to these forms.
- reflect on our own teaching/school based practices to better respond to new emerging information about the way people learn, the use of technology, and 21C skills required. One of our 'think tanks' could focus on this.
- drive further change, take on new, collaborative roles and become knowledge workers ourselves. Our proposed ICTPD Cluster and its makeup is likely to support this but even without it we must promote/expect teachers to participate in the networks/knowledge building processes that are beyond our school boundary. At the time of writing about half of the staff have their own personal, professional blog and/or class blog. We need to make this a requirement.

Even though we have given a great deal of time and effort to the planning for the school there are still remarkable gaps to be filled and significant changes to be made. I'm both excited and challenged by the shift in education, the stuff that is happening and the stuff that needs to happen. I look forward to further participating in this process –a term wasn't enough!

David Reardon

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