Sabbatical Report

E learning, student ownership and engagement

Liz Gunn
Principal
Churchill Park School
Auckland

Principals' Sabbatical 1 July – 23 September 2016

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Examining the relationship between e learning, student ownership of, and engagement with, their learning was the key focus of this sabbatical research topic. The main tools to gather findings were principal and student surveys, supported by visits to schools in the local and international communities.

From the ten question **principal survey**, the following key findings emerged:
- The majority of schools surveyed had an e earning action plan
- Nearly 50 % were utilising BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) in some form
- The majority of schools were embedding e learning through staff professional development
- The majority of principals felt that e learning did enhance student engagement with their learning

Student Survey:
- The principal view of student engagement was supported by the student survey where nearly 75% felt they enjoyed the use of e learning tools to support their learning

School Visits:
Local and international school visits emphasised the importance of:
- Having an e learning action plan in place with leadership support to drive it and accountability built in at all levels
- Having the infrastructure to support the devices, tools and programmes so that staff and students experience success
- Having ongoing e learning professional development to support staff

Areas for development indicated by the principal survey:
- Embedding e learning more across the curriculum
- Utilising e learning to engage in wider, global contexts
- Utilising e learning more to engage with parents and whanau

Sabbatical Report:
E learning, Student Ownership and Engagement

Purpose

To examine the relationship between e learning (or learning with digital technologies), student ownership and engagement with their learning

Rationale

To link current research and pedagogy around e learning with what is happening in schools: does the use of digital technologies enhance student ownership and engagement with their learning?

Background

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) document states that e learning has "considerable potential" to support the vision of the New Zealand curriculum through helping to "open up new and different ways of learning (NZC, Pg. 36). For over ten years, all New Zealand schools have been developing their curriculum to suit their own contexts and implementing infrastructure, resources and e learning strategies to support student learning in the 21st century.

Since the implementation of the NZC, a recent key discussion paper with priorities for the future, 'Future Focused Learning in Connected Communities' has listed ten strategic priorities as being necessary in order to commit to meeting the needs of 21st century learners. It maintains that society has changed as a result of the impact of

digital technologies and that we must ensure all learners are digitally literate in order to engage fully in a 21st century education system.

These ten priorities include achieving equitable access to digital devices for all learners, building digital learning capability across the education system, and creating technology rich learning environments which put learning at the heart. As Castells (1998) states: "Information technology and the ability to use it and adapt it, is the critical factor in generating and accessing wealth, power and knowledge in our time". Therefore, digital competencies are seen as being an extremely important and integral part of literacies alongside numeracy and literacy and are essential to the knowledge and capability of every student and teacher.

Another facet of 21st century pedagogy and the future focused curriculum is the concept of student ownership of their learning , that students are authentically engaged with their learning and have ownership of their own learning process. That learners have this agency over their learning is now a default expectation ..."for young people adept at technology to access, participate in and even contribute to the learning that meets their needs" (Pg. 35 – Appendix 1: Defining Digital Competency – Future Focused Learning in Digital Communities).

Julia Atkin points out that for e learning to play an effective role in schools, leaders must acknowledge where staff are in their own elearning journeys so that they can provide professional development to support the staff to develop their individual capabilities. This is very important as e learning is .." not just a vehicle for learning but a vehicle for being a learner in the 21st Century", according to Atkin.

 One of the key strategic priorities, therefore, in the report (Future Focused Learning in Connected Communities) is to 'Invest in People' in order to build digital learning capability for all across the

education system. The report goes on to state that …." we must ensure digital competency becomes a fundamental component of every student and teacher's knowledge" (Pg. 33 Appendix One).

This research project, therefore, seeks to establish whether e learning (learning with digital technologies) is indeed becoming an integral part of schools today and whether students feel they have ownership over their learning and engagement with their learning, through the use of e learning tools and strategies.

Methodology

- Principal survey

- Student survey

- School visits:
  Auckland area
  London - Greenwich area
  Copenhagen

- Conference attendance – Melbourne

Findings (see Principal Survey appendix)

Principal Survey

> There were ten statements in the principals' survey with possible responses of Not Yet, Sometimes, Consistently, Always and Other.
>
> The statements were:
> 1. **Our school utilizes an e learning strategy / action plan**
> 2. **Our school utilizes BYOD policies and practices**
> 3. **Our school provides regular e learning professional development**
> 4. **Our school embeds e learning through a cross curricular approach**
> 5. **Our school uses student voice and feedback to support and drive e learning directions**
> 6. **Our students engage with parents and whanau using e learning tools to share and discuss their learning**
> 7. **Our students demonstrate engagement with the wider curriculum through e learning**
> 8. **Our students engage globally with the wider community through e learning**
> 9. **Our students engage with e learning as creators rather than consumers of content**
> 10. **Overall, e learning enhances student engagement**

> 1. **Our school utilises an e learning strategy / action plan**
>   Of the thirty six principals who responded, 63.9% felt they Consistently or Always had an e learning strategy or action plan, with 8.3% responding Not Yet. The 'Not Yet' response was somewhat surprising given that e learning development has been a high MOE priority for some years now with many e

learning initiatives and professional development opportunities having been offered to schools.

2. **Our school utilises BYOD policies and practices**
44% responded Consistently or Always with 30.6% responding Not Yet. This is a developing area with many schools just beginning to explore BYOD initiatives as it does involve policy decisions that requires Board of Trustees input and strategic overview.

3. **Our school provides regular e learning professional development**
61.1% responded Consistently or Always which indicates that e learning professional development is becoming an embedded feature of many schools. This aligns with the statement in "Future Focused Learning in Connected Communities - Appendix One (Pg. 33) that it is necessary to ensure that .." digital competency becomes a fundamental component of every …teacher's knowledge".

4. **Our school embeds e learning through a cross curricular approach**.
58.3% responded Consistently or Always with 25% responding Sometimes. This could indicate that e learning is viewed as a stand alone subject by some schools and is not integrated throughout the curriculum.

5. **Our school uses student voice and feedback to support and drive e learning directions.**
25% responded Consistently or Always to this statement with the majority responding Sometimes (63.9%). This could indicate a need for balance between student voice and teacher direction with e learning - that is, an aligned approach rather

than a totally student driven one. In this consistently developing area of e learning where everyone is a learner, schools and their leaders are perhaps proceeding cautiously in what is ever changing new territory.

6 .Our students engage with parents and whanau using e learning tools to share and discuss their learning.
25% responded Consistently or Always to this statement with 41.7% responding Sometimes. This is a developing area which is being explored currently by schools as to how to best engage with parents and whanau in a timely, authentic manner using current and readily available technology. The ways parents link with their learners' schools is being fundamentally changed

through digital technologies as learning is for the students them selves. The recent ERO discussion booklet " Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whanau " is an indicator of the importance of these connections for ongoing and meaningful learning for students in the 21C.

7.Our students demonstrate engagement with the wider curriculum through e learning.
44.5% of responses indicated Consistently or Always with 50% Indicating Sometimes or Not Yet (47.2% Sometimes). This Indicates that e learning is not as fully embedded across the curriculum as could be expected after nearly twenty years of professional development in this area. This is a surprising statistic given that MOE has given budgetary support for all schools to support learning with digital technologies and that I.T. contracts for school clusters date from the 1990's, and have been followed up with many other initiatives such as the current Learning With Digital Technologies professional development. The becoming wide spread use of Google docs is also an

opportunity to develop further engagement with parents and whanau in our communities.

8. Our students engage globally with the wider community through e learning.

66.7% responded Sometimes with 16.7% responding Not Yet, a total of over 83% (with only 13.9% responding Consistently). This definitely indicates that communication through e learning tools and strategies is very much a developing area and one that can be explored a lot further. We do espouse our 21stC learners as being connected citizens who will utilise global resources and links in their foreseeable futures yet this response may indicate that we are not doing enough yet.

9. Our students engage with e learning as creators rather than consumers of content.

58% responded Sometimes or Not Yet with 36% responding Consistently. This may indicate that e learning approaches and strategies in schools are beginning to develop with a more creative, rather than consumer, focus. This is in line with the huge growth and development in apps and software that are constantly being created for educational and creative use. The student inquiry focus in schools is also a driver for authentic and active student led outcomes rather than a passive, consumer approach.

10. Overall, e learning enhances student engagement.
This was a very subjective statement to include in the principals' survey but one which, I felt, would enable principals to provide a 'gut feel' response.

61% of responses indicated Consistently or Always with 30% responding Sometimes. This can be seen as demonstrating an

overall positive response of principals feeling that e learning does enhance student engagement.

In order to check congruence with this assumption the following student survey was then administered to 117 Year 5 and 6 students from a variety of Auckland schools in order to gain authentic student voice on this topic.

Student Survey

The statements for the students to consider (using Rarely, Sometimes, Consistently or Always) were:

1. **I use e learning tools to support my learning**

2. **I enjoy using e learning tools**

3. **I feel I have ownership of my learning through using e learning tools**

1. **I use e learning tools to support my learning**
   Of the 117 student responses, 70.9% responded Consistently or Always which indicates a high level of e learning use. One improvement to this survey would have been to identify the number of BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) users in the sample as some of the schools involved do follow this policy. However, the overall response does indicate the availability of e learning devices and the consistent use of e learning strategies by students to support their learning.

2. **I enjoy using e learning tools to support my learning.**
   74.4% of the 117 students responded Consistently or Always. This indicates a high level of enjoyment or satisfaction with using e

learning tools to support learning. It may also indicate enjoyment of the greater level of student agency involved with the use of e learning tools and strategies. For example, if students are creating some form of multi media presentation to reflect their learning, there is often a high degree of choice of how this may be done through choice of device, format, style, characterisation etc.

This figure can be seen as representing a high level of engagement with learning by students. This correlates well with the Principal Survey response figure of 61.1% (Consistently or Always) to the statement 'Overall e -learning enhances student engagement.

3. **I feel I have ownership of my learning through using e learning tools**
   66.3% responded Consistently or Always with 32.8% responding Sometimes. This also indicates a high level of student satisfaction with being in control of their learning through the elements of choice and individuality that the use of e learning tools and strategies can provide.

School Visits

Auckland Schools
A number of the schools visited shared some of the following characteristics with regard to e learning in their schools:

- **Structures to support the pedagogy:**
  All agreed the infrastructure e.g. wireless systems , was essential to ensure success of e learning programmes and for teacher confidence and support
- **BYOD**

This is continuing to be a developing area with some schools developing this in senior / Intermediate classes only , while others are trialling this in lower areas of the school.

- **Google Docs**
  The use of Google Docs is becoming widespread as an effective tool to encourage collaboration, peer and teacher review, and sharing with parent and wider communities
- **Student voice**
  E learning tools and strategies are strengthening student voice through greater choice in ways of learning, collaborating , sharing and presenting
- **Parent portal / links**
  This is a developing area with most schools exploring ways of utilising e learning to share student learning through an e portfolio lens. With 41.7% of principals responding 'Sometimes' to the related question in their survey, however, this is certainly an area for continuing focus in the future.

Overseas School Visits: (also see attached notes)
The two London schools and one Copenhagen (North) school visited as well as an in depth interview with the superintendent of twelve Copenhagen primary schools, brought up the following key points:

- The importance of school leadership for developing strategic vision and direction , along with school governance bodies
- The importance of planning for direct involvement at all levels of the school, along with accountability e.g. links with school goals, appraisal systems and classroom planning
- The importance of continuing professional development to improve teacher confidence , skill and develop positive mindsets to empower them to be powerful e learning classroom practitioners and school leaders

Summary

Both the principal and student surveys demonstrated the overall statement that e learning does enhance student engagement (61.1% of principals and 74.4% of students). However, there are several aspects that impact on this, and need continuing development for the future, including:

- **School leadership of e learning**
  There needs to be an e learning plan consistently in place for schools to gain momentum with growing digital literacy for both staff and students. The fact that approximately a third of principals surveyed did not have a plan in place was quite surprising and perhaps suggests that this needs to be an integral part of all strategic and annual plans for schools.
- **School action planning / curriculum**
  Similarly, annual plans for e learning and curriculum areas would need to demonstrate how e learning can become an integral part of all areas of the curriculum so that the use of e learning strategies becomes part of 'how things get done around here'. This then links through to individual team and teacher planning so that opportunities for students and staff are constantly being developed to provide for student engagement with their learning.
- **Professional development opportunities**
  As research has suggested, investing in people to build their digital learning capabilities is a key strategic priority. Professional development needs to be continuing to support staff at all levels of digital capability and to foster further innovation in teaching and learning strategies.

- **Access to devices**
  This is integral to students having equitable access to building their digital capabilities. Through my visits to a number of

schools it can be seen that schools are currently in many different spaces with some having BYOD at different levels of the school, some having more stand alone IT areas and others with tools integrated in classroom practice. This is an area that is changing rapidly. Although the MOE has provided some level of IT funding to schools for a number of years, the level of need has increased markedly and schools are having to make decisions quickly with regard to equity of access to devices in order to provide for a variety of opportunities that will engage and motivate students in their learning.

- **Embedding e learning across the curriculum**
  With 25% of principals responding 'Sometimes' to the related survey question, it is important that e learning is embedded more widely across the curriculum to enhance student engagement with learning. If schools are espousing the need for student voice, and greater choice in their learning tools and strategies, then further embedding of e learning across the curriculum would seem necessary in order to achieve this.

- **Engagement through e learning in wider, global contexts**
  With 66 % of principals responding 'Sometimes' to the related survey question, this is an area for greater development in order for our learners to become the 'actively engaged global citizens ' that is at the core of our New Zealand curriculum

- **Utilising e learning to engage with parents and whanau**
  With the need to develop ongoing and positive relationships with our parents and whanau in order to maximise student potential and achievement, we need to harness e learning tools and strategies further to improve our communication for ongoing sharing of information.

Providing for 21st Century learning needs is an ever changing landscape with the speed of change in technology , social media and communication always making education a 'catch up' game. The current changes in school infrastructure , for

example, with focusing on building 'innovative learning environments' demonstrates how important an emphasis the government is placing on the provision of flexible, student centred learning spaces. With digital literacy for every student and teacher being an integral aspect of this, it therefore is essential that we maintain the focus on developing digital skills and capabilities so that everyone can engage as learners to participate, contribute and thrive as well educated New Zealanders of the future.

References:

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