

Primary Principals Sabbatical Report 2016

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Investigating On- line learning opportunities to support student learning.

To find out and implement best practice for developing online collaborative learning opportunities for students in small rural schools.

Background

Makarora School is a small school situated at the head of Lake Wanaka 60 kms from the nearest school. Makarora Valley has a permanent population of around 35 households (approx 85 people). In 2016 there were 16 children at Makarora School ranging from 5-11 years old (Y1-6), 3 boys and 11 girls. The school is staffed by a teaching principal, a part time teacher employed .2 , a part time administration person and a part time teacher's aide (10 hours per week). Living in such an environment offers a range of wonderful opportunities such as a large lake on the doorstep, a range of rivers, direct access to Mt Aspiring National Park. The challenges are around isolation, lack of local services, lack of people resources and the distance from educational support. There is no cellphone reception and at this stage internet speed is acceptable but not able to be ultra fast. Modern technologies have opened up a range of possibilities for providing learning opportunities and I would like to be able to extend these opportunities, hence the focus of my sabbatical.

Seizing the opportunity to read a range of articles in the comfort of my lounge at a leisurely pace gave me the time to reflect on what I had read around on-line learning, learning to learn and self directed learning and the value of collaborative learning. I also talked with colleagues in other small schools to find out how they were using on - line learning opportunities for children, and for themselves. Virtual Learning Network appears to be popular to support Learning Languages programmes, E Time Virtual School has been used. I trialled a small group of Year 6 students children using *E -Time Virtual School* to complete a topic around our whole school learning which was looking at the future and how we can influence the direction by "thinking globally, acting local".

Education in the 21st Century requires a different way of thinking and learning *we need to think differently about what schools are for, about what students should learn in them and about how*

we should measure the “success” of all this. Ally Bull and Jane Gilbert *Swimming out of our depth? Leading learning in 21st century schools* **New Zealand Council for Educational Research 2012**

There are many different forms of on- line learning which is more commonly called e learning *...learning and teaching that is facilitated by or supported through the appropriate use of information and communication technologies (e-learning.tki.org.nz)*. It is about making a conscious choice of the best and most appropriate ways to promote effective learning (Karen Melhuish Spencer [www. MOE Enabling e learning:e-learning. tki.org](http://www.MOE.govt.nz/e-learning)). There are a plethora of on- learning tools that can be used in the classroom to enhance learning for students and deciding what to use can be as confusing as it is exciting. I was pleased to read that Pakuranga College believes that e - learning should be *invisible within in the classroom, whereby students access the learning tools that will best support their learning.* (“The Benefits of ‘Outcome-Based’ e -Learning” in *Interface #68* December 2015 p25) .

The role of teachers needs to change considerably in an e learning environment *teachers need to be “learning coaches”—a role that is very different from that of a traditional teacher. Learning coaches may provide knowledge and develop skills: however, their main role, as more experienced learners, is to provide the kinds of support that will help their students reach their learning goals. Learning coaches, like their students, are also learners* in Ally Bull and Jane Gilbert ,*Swimming out of our depth? Leading learning in 21st century schools* New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2012

The use of e- learning is varied amongst schools and depends considerably on the technical expertise of the individual principal in small schools. While they may have made a shift to thinking as learning coaches, the school leaders do not always have the skills level either themselves or available in the school or local environment to make it happen (I speak of myself as an example). It appears that collaborative partnerships may offer a part solution.

During 2016, schools in my area were investigating various ways to collaborate, and we went some way towards forming a Community of Learners (CoL), eventually forming a Professional Learning and Development group to enable us to become involved in New Pedagogies for Deeper Learning, based around a Michael Fullan initiative that involves local, national and global collaboration to bring about improved learning for students. Using technologies is the key tool to making collaboration a reality. In this context deeper learning is described as .. *authentic engagement in real world challenges. It is the ability to master and leverage existing content knowledge, making links to reinterpret and create new learning (New Pedagogies for Deeper Learning - A Global Research Project - information flier produced by CORE Education 2016-17)*

I realised that while I had set out to find out more about on- line tools (e learning) to support learning for my students, I was in fact approaching it from the wrong direction, that it was one small part of a much bigger picture. As soon as my colleagues shared their understanding of deeper learning and the excitement they felt about the concept I recognised the potential to go in a direction that complemented my philosophy of learning and teaching. I am now committed to working with other schools in my area as a cluster for the next 3 years learning alongside my colleagues both immediately around me, nationally and globally, finding ways to provide deeper learning for children, myself and my colleagues.

It was through the sabbatical leave that I was able to step back, reflect on future directions, and find the path to take , so I thank my colleagues who in the past negotiated with Ministry of Education to provide this very value opportunity. I thank my Board of Trustees for allowing me to take the leave, for my part time staff who were willing to return to full time teaching for a term so I could be released. I am forever thankful to Principals in the Upper Clutha Cluster who not only were responsible for introducing the idea of deeper learning and sharing their excitement, but who have provided supported in various ways in the past 15 years. Kia kaha, we will stand strong together.