

Principal Sabbatical Report 2013

Focus: To explore how school leaders engage their communities, with special emphasis on the use of school websites, parent and child portals and e-learning.

Receiving a sabbatical has provided me with a wonderful opportunity to explore aspects of how schools are engaging their communities using Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and how school leaders manage this.

During these investigations it is hard not to be distracted by the exciting and engaging opportunities now available to children in our primary schools. I've also had the chance to consider our National Curriculum is it still too prescriptive? How does it meet the needs of today's learners? Does it have 'Bluetooth' or 'Wi-Fi', is it in the 'Cloud' or rooted firmly to the earth?

Given that the time frame from applying for a sabbatical and actually taking it has been several months, there has been a slight shift in my needs and focus. While including the main aspects of my sabbatical I have had a tighter focus on how children engage in ICT and how schools can make better use of technology. In my investigations I've gained a much better understanding of effective pedagogy in ICT and hope to share this in my report.

CONTEXT

It is becoming almost cliché now that our children will be entering a workforce with jobs that don't exist yet. Consider this; a new entrant entering school in 2013 will be leaving school between 2024 and 2026. The child who leaves later will most likely be aiming for some form of tertiary training whatever that will look like. What might the needs of a nation be in 2026 and beyond and what institutions other than schools have to plan this far out and for uncertain outcomes? As schools we tend to plan strategically up to five years out, is this enough?

The world has undergone change in the past ten to twenty years; mostly technological, that makes the industrial revolution look like a walk in the park. Brian Gaynor; investment strategist and New Zealand Herald contributor believes that the technology revolution has only just begun. Imagine:

- A working day that fits in around you. Your alarm clock does not run by time alone but receives input from monitors so as to not disturb your R.E.M sleep patterns.
- Grocery shopping may not exist as our refrigerators and pantries monitor our food and consumables and reorder them for us when required. There are already refrigerators that monitor electricity and enter their defrost cycle when power is at its cheapest, or smart phone apps that allow you to scan the bar codes of items and send them straight to your local supermarket for delivery or collection.
- Smart phone devices that monitor internal sensors in your body keeping check on your health and wellbeing. Imagine a phone call from your doctor that you need to come and see them before your heart attack due tomorrow.

- Road fatalities almost eliminated by driverless cars. These aren't way off dreams as Google is already developing GPS guided driverless cars with the Stanford University. Florida, California and Nevada already have legalised robotic cars. Even in New Zealand, mainstream products from Ford and Volkswagen have sonar guided systems for avoiding accidents and can self-park.

During my investigations I came across this quote from Doris Lessing. Lessing left school at 14 and was self-taught from then on. She became a prominent British novelist and playwright without the assistance of established higher education.

'Ideally, what should be said to every child, repeatedly, throughout his or her school life is something like this:

You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry but it's the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show you how permanent these must be. You are being taught by people who have been able to accommodate themselves to a regime of thought laid down by their predecessors. It is a self-perpetuating system. Those of you who are more robust and individual than others will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourselves, educating your own judgements. Those that stay must remember always and all the time, that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of society.' Doris Lessing *'The Golden Notebook'*

This statement has challenged me to think beyond our regular curriculum and what we should be offering our young learners. I'm also intrigued as to why our most entrepreneurial and successful contributors to society fared so poorly in our education systems. Ask Sir Peter Leitch what he thought of his school days and you'll get a very short answer. I believe because a number of people struggle with literacy as the foundation for learning they are more able to tune their interpersonal skills. Not being able to articulate a letter or e.mail means that the face to face contact and oral communications need to become well honed. Are we stifling this in our schools by insisting all our children are fully literate at all cost? Often that cost is a total switch off from school all together. Can technology be better used to engage these learners?

My parents believed that television would destroy my generation and yet my own children barely watch it preferring to individualise their viewing on smart gadgets. These are usually interactive rather than passive activities and so could be considered a better option than hours of CHiPs or Knight Rider.

And so what then for education? There is a theory that if someone was to time warp from the 1960s to the present day they'd feel most at home in a school as; for most part, these are still pretty similar to what they'd be used to. One might surmise from Michael Fullan's work that this is starting to change.

Fullan identifies three ideas which are converging in the current climate, being **pedagogy**, **change knowledge** and **technology**. He bemoans our current curriculum pedagogy as being too content bound. Our New Zealand National Curriculum is refreshingly devoid of onerous content bound learning outcomes and identifies clearly a set of shared values and key competencies. Unfortunately

this is being eroded on two fronts. Internally many schools are resistant or unable to manage change and externally Global Education Reforms are pushing standards based education. New Zealand is soon to adopt the PACT tool in which all our national standards data will be generated and moderated.

There are millions of well-educated competent graduates of our schooling system, which is widely acknowledged as one of the best in the world however we need to accept that currently schools do not meet the needs of all learners. Of concern also is the disparity between primary and secondary sectors in our education with regards to innovation in ICT. We are beginning to see children from high stimulus primary schools feeling lost when they get to traditional style learning environments in high school. ICTs are mainstream now and hold the key to better communication and collaboration across home and school and from within schools across schooling sectors.

The above context is supposed to enhance rather than distract from my findings however it is important to understand that our country is a very different place from that of thirty years ago and learning environments need to keep pace with this.

How do schools engage their communities using ICT?

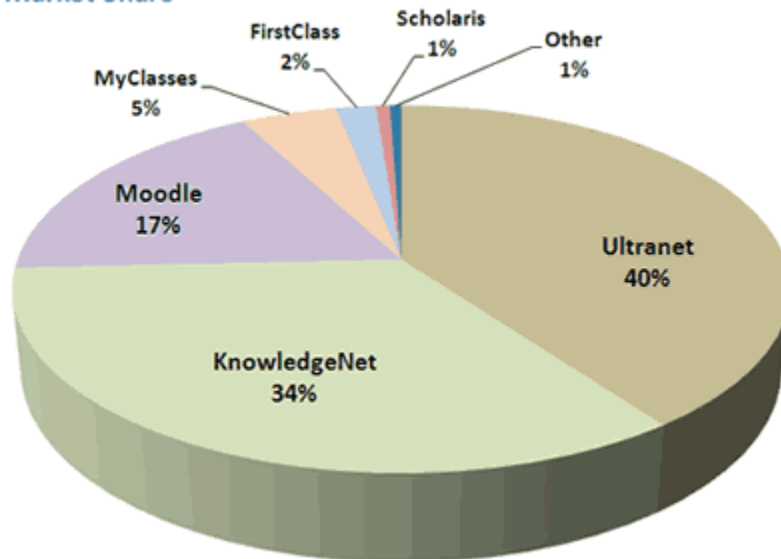
Learning Management Systems / Online Learning Environments (LMS / OLE)

Of the schools I've visited, most managed a structured Online Learning Environment (OLE). These ranged from structured commercial providers offering propriety products such as Ultraset, to schools who manage their own open source environments through tools such as Google docs and their own website.

Structured propriety LMS was chosen by schools for very similar reasons. Mostly they were seen to provide a level of direction and organisation to schools that they might have struggled with on their own. Ironically the very reasons that some schools chose a propriety Learning Management system were the same reasons that other schools avoided them. A number of schools wanted the freedom to collaborate more widely and not have the boundaries of a LMS. It is my observation that schools cutting their own path had strong leadership in ICT and a passionate and competent practitioner to guide the staff. The pattern here I observed is also that these are larger schools providing release to an established staff member who spent considerable time engaging with technology both professionally and personally. It is important to consider the costs of implementing a Learning Management System. A number of schools were swayed by the cost. A propriety provider will cost several thousands of dollars and there are on-going costs to be borne both in hosting and professional development. It is important that schools keep check with the cost of open source systems as there is usually one or two staff committing a lot of time to the running, establishing and training aspects of these. It is a bigger financial commitment for schools to be going it alone and the opportunity cost of having good staff tied to ICT. That's not to say that it can't work very well but smaller schools seem better off to have paid for the support.

The main options for Learning Management Systems are.

LMS Market Share



Source: Ministry of Education July 10th 2013

Of significance here in communication with school communities is the inclusion of a parent portal, although all schools using this facility commented that getting parents reliably using this portal was difficult. Often when parents were engaging with their children's work it is while the child is logged on as themselves so there is no real objective measure of how often parents are viewing children's work. A short coming of Ultranet was that when children are logged on they can look at and critique their peers work, when a parent uses that portal they too can see other classmates work which in some cases is not appropriate.

School Website:

An active website is an integral part of any institution. All schools I visited manage a website with mixed effectiveness. Their sites achieve different purposes and each school needs a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve from their sites. Most commonly they are a front page window to the school and provide some broad information about the school such as a description, vision and mission statements. Less commonly are they a regular portal for up to date information, events and calendars. Most schools have set their sites up but do little to manage or update them. They report that they are not used regularly by the community but rather prospective parents and businesses for marketing. Some schools report good engagement with their sites but have at least one person responsible for the maintenance of their school site. Only one school stated that they had done away with hard copy newsletters completely. In the case of Ultranet client schools, their website formed part of Ultranet and these sites were more likely to be updated and

carry current information. Again they relied on at least one person with specific responsibility for maintaining these sites.

E.Portfolios.

I did not get the chance to fully explore e.portfolios however in the case of Ultranet schools some schools were making great use of these and others had not used them at all. Schools generally felt they had significant value but did not wish to see them as just a digital version of what they had. The schools using them well required a clear vision and buy in across the school because of the volume of work required (initially at least) by staff to set these up. Inconsistent use across the school was a common theme as they relied a lot on teacher competency.

SMS / Texting.

It was interesting to see schools using SMS effectively. My own experience of this service has been that it was incredibly expensive and we chose not to pursue it. This was several years ago now and technology has moved on. There are simple software programmes now that, using a smart phone can text a whole school community if required. By utilising cheap text deals such as 2000 texts a month for \$10 available from most of the main providers, the software scrolls through the school data base texting a batch of ten numbers at a time. A few minutes is all that's required for a whole school of 250+ families to be texted. Note Pager Pro is a good example of this technology.

Effective pedagogy in ICT.

This is an area not specifically included in my sabbatical proposal however it has become a more integral part of my work. Teaching as inquiry should allow teachers to explore areas of need and this is always evolving.

Michael Fullan warns schools not to become over reliant on technology and I have to admit to seeing some very 'techy' stuff of which I struggled to see the relevance of. Fullan sees as essential a stripping back of content based curriculum in favour of purpose and passion.

'Learn how to learn because the evolving world is ever changing and elusive. We need the capacity to keep up - to periodically grasp the ungraspable. Only those who know how to learn, who can relate to others and the environment (including things), and who make the world part of their own evolving being, will thrive in this world. It is dam exciting to live in the world we do with the brains we have.' Fullan 2013

We cannot ignore the future. There is no advantage in not engaging in this. There is only the chance to be left behind and lost in the current world. A brief look either online or newspaper situations vacant identifies employers who want people who can work well alone or in team. They must possess communication skills and relate well to others. They need to speak and articulate well. These skills can't be learned from a book and are the key reasons that technology will never take over from teachers. Technology is evolving in a manner that far outstrips education and it is up to schools to rein this in and use it as effective tools for learning. Society looks so very different from society 40 years ago and yet classrooms do not. That is not to say schools are not making progress but I believe many are losing the race. The biggest risk here is that learners are at risk of disengaging from school. A quick search for data on student engagement in school in New Zealand brings about information regarding enrolments and stand downs or suspensions. Students however can be actively enrolled in school but completely disengaged. A study of 2000 US students showed

that enthusiasm for school drops from 95% in year one to 37% by year nine. A PISA 2003 report on engagement and belonging in a school environment showed New Zealand fared much worse than the USA so unless there has been a quantum shift the USA data may *at best* describe how enthusiastic our young learners are about schooling by the time they reach year nine. There is a slight gain up to 45% in year 12 after which compulsory schooling finishes in New Zealand. How can technology help? There is a lot it can do if a school can make the necessary shifts required to utilise it. It is not enough to add technological devices to our schools, we need to carefully manage the changes required and be prepared to shun a lot of our well established and closely held beliefs.

The key criteria for integrating technology and pedagogy in schools according to Fullan are that it must be...

- **irresistibly engaging**
- **elegantly efficient**
- **technologically ubiquitous**
- **steeped in real life problem solving.**

The real advantage for schools currently is that the technology to achieve this is now here with the era of responsive, mobile tablet technology. There have been some red herrings along the way; a clear case in point is the interactive white board craze. In most applications they harked back to a bygone era of chalk and talk teaching that did little to build on what schools had already. They merely substituted or at best augmented the existing classroom learning.

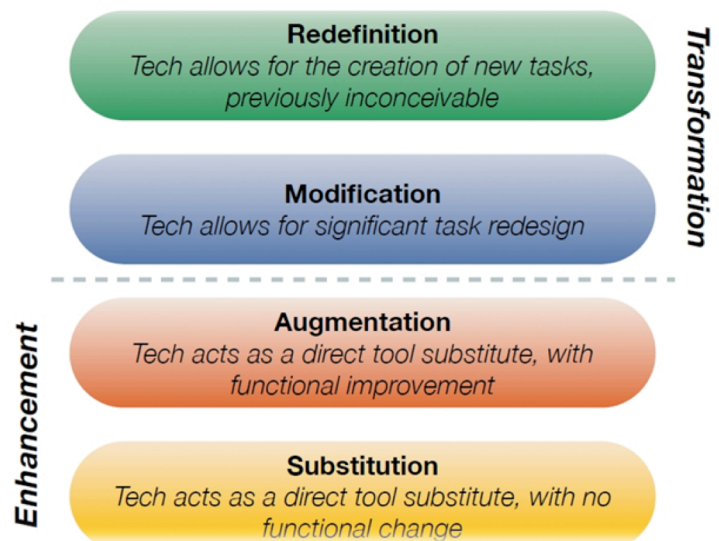
What we have now is not just tools for sharing information but platforms for a completely new realm of higher level thinking and learning.

Dr Ruebn Puentedura describes this in his SAMR model.

For most of us most of the time we tend to be substituting one technology for another. Let's look at reading text for example. We can substitute a book with an iPad with no real advantage. If we use the dictionary features we are streamlining a little but still in the augmentation phase as this is still an option for learners to look things up. To modify this task is to break new ground and might allow the use of technology in completely different areas but still with similar outcomes. The ultimate is when we learn using the technology to accomplish things previously not possible without the technology. Learners might be using the recording tools to collaborate across learners from a number of different schools, gaining their response to a particular text.

There is a lot to learn here and searching Dr Puentedura on YouTube will bring some insightful clips.

What is required for successful pedagogy in ICT in our schools is successful leadership. I was encouraged to look at leadership as I have noticed a lack of strong leadership in this field from our most experienced and knowledgeable school leaders. There are a lot of resources online such as TKI however they usually show generation Y teachers happy in their tech laden classrooms. It seems that those digital immigrants; us who did not have computers as part of our own education look to



struggle or even bury our heads in the sand when it comes to ICT. So then, what of our established leaders, how do we lead effectively in a field we are least qualified to lead in?

'The precarious and dichotomous situations that many educational leaders experience in today's ever-changing educational climate often leaves them feeling isolated and uncertain. The resultant loss of confidence lessens their ability to carry out their role effectively. Unless leaders experience the type of professional leadership development or support that enables them to cope effectively with change, they are likely to assume more tentative and ineffectual styles of leadership...' Jan Robertson

Despite not being the savvy adopters of technology that others on the staff may be, principals must take the leading learner role and if they do not have the skill set themselves, work closely alongside a suitable school leader who does. This is more challenging in a smaller school where principals are more likely to have a wider portfolio as well as a teaching component. I believe it is very challenging for digital immigrants to have strong leadership in this field, due to the inability to truly grasp what the future of e.learning might look like. All strong leaders have a **vision** for their schools. They work hard to create these and use much collaboration but also; ultimately, their own view of effective teaching and learning in their schools. If they cannot include ICT in this, or empower a highly trusted school leader with it, they will struggle.

Change in schools is inevitable, most of us have sound models for managing change, the biggest issue here is the pace of this change and do our models still stack up?

So what do I do with all of this? Simon Heath at Renwick School was one of the first principals I visited. It was great to see him using a SWOT model, more common in business than education however it is this process that I'll be entering upon returning to school. I have also picked up a number of strategies from the business sector which I feel educators should do more often. The concept of collaboration is important to us all but I will bring a new slant on it. By brain storming and collaborating together some valuable ideas are not shared. By requiring participants to brainstorm in isolation **first** I hope to solicit more innovative ideas and not necessarily all from the same corner. So what's SWOT?

This analysis tool simply allows us to look at these four main components much like a business would. We don't often think of threats in our schools apart from our safety action plans but threats take the form of anything that could get in the way of learner out comes. Having the right environment for this tool is important as stakeholders need to be objective and honest enough to say what needs to be said. If, for example, the principal is seen to be a weakness in the leadership of a school it needs to be identified and clearly addressed.

I hope to initially work through this with my staff and then my new Board of Trustees. Then we'll look to manage this in our community as we move through our whole school review and strategic planning update. We have slowly evolved in the past nine years of my tenure but I now see a renewed desire to buy more into ICT, sharing the effective pedagogy tools and ideas I have. What is also timely is the concept of modern learning environments; often hard to achieve on small budgets but then we are relying on innovation aren't we?



HIGHLIGHTS:

- An insightful discussion with Simon Heath from Renwick School near Blenheim and seeing the results of strong leadership and his vision for Renwick School.

- Stratosphere by Michael Fullan. This articulate Canadian has done much to influence my thoughts on ICT and reflect on my next steps for my current school.
- Reflection: having the time to explore. I've looked at dozens of TED talks clips, explored the Kahn academy and learned how to drive Windows 8 and my new iPad.
- Leading learning: It has been 8 years since I have taken on any formal learning leading to higher education. This past term I've been inspired to do more and enrolled back at Massey for this coming semester.

Special thanks to all those who contributed to this sabbatical project.