

Sabbatical report - How do create a culture of innovation into our schools?

Christine Allen, Carmel College, 2016.

Introduction: my area of interest for this sabbatical study has been how to build a more innovative culture in our learning community. There are the plethora of educational theorists, practitioners and government agencies who are offering innumerable solutions and advice about how to go about making our education system more suited to the learning needs of our current students. If we are being asked to deliver programmes of learning that are more personalised and more focused on the individual learner, how do we equip our staff to provide such learning programmes that are very different from the way our steadily aging teaching force were taught themselves and how they were trained to teach? How do you make any of this happen?

Below is a way that I believe can make us find out what the real issues and problems are facing both our students and our staff. This process then provides some practical advice about how to make these solutions to what we find out actually happen.

So how do you come up with a great ideas and actually make them happen? Luckily, I have come across Ewan McIntosh who has written such a book and has a whole range of ideas and suggestions as to how you can make your great ideas an actual reality.

He has taken ideas from his work with start-up companies all over the world, his consultancy work with business and education and shows how many of the same principles from business can apply to education.

My thinking for this sabbatical is then set out in the Pitch format - this format is part of the final step in the McIntosh suggested process for how to come up with great ideas and actually make them happen.

1. Start the pitch with a bang (and a problem)

Picture these two scenarios: 1. Houston, we have a problem. Where do you go to find the answers? Who is involved with finding the answers? How do you select the right answer to that particular problem? How do you put this right answer into practice effectively and sustainably? We can get lost in a sea of questions and never get to the action part.

Scenario 2: New idea, think about it, plan it out, present it, allocate resourcing, monitor it and not much changes!

The new idea has faltered on the rock strewn path of passive resistance and indifference and fallen into sink into the swamp of 'initiatives of the past'.

How can we create an environment where people have the 'permission' to come up with ideas about how to continue on the journey of continuous improvement? Where you or the SLT are not the only ones who come up with and implement new ideas?

- 2. Start with a 30-second elevator pitch which ramps up the pain of the problem you're going to try to solve. Make it grab our attention. Use the evidence from your First Horizon work to really show the problem in the real world; this is better than paraphrasing what the problem is, and people will be quicker to believe the 'pain' you are describing. This should hook us from the get-go - create intrigue, grab our attention. Don't tell us what you 'did', all the steps you went through to get this far - we're not interested in how hard you've worked! Instead, tell us what you might have discovered.*

Well, we've all inquiry cycled, some of us have even got off the cycle and gone into Timperley's spiral of inquiry. And the commonality of these two models - going round in circles!

There is no shortage of problems and ideas with regards to education today but the issue is fundamentally, how do we solve these problems and implement new ideas to make sure we are moving in the right direction. Solving real issues that are affecting education today to ensure our students are well prepared for their future?

This has been a familiar repeated process: Looking big picture, you've seen an area that needs addressing. You've done some research, discussed with some people, come up with a plan, presented the idea with a flashy PP and asked for feedback or questions so you can further develop the idea and met the wall of silence or indifference. Very little comment if any and then, most comments are usually very individualised / shallow.

An example for us is the real disconnects we have had highlighted in our Well Being Survey. Our teachers unanimously say that they know each of their students as individual learners yet the students overwhelmingly say that their teachers know little about their backgrounds and that they have very little input into their own learning. How can we move to more individualised, personalised learning programmes when our staff say they are already doing this and the students say 'no way'?

- 3. The experience: Take us on a user journey where we see the problem solved. Make sure we understand how useful this idea is in solving the problem.*

If you want to drive a whole school or even a particular segment of school change, it can be an energy sapping, soul destroying journey.

Here, with McIntosh's book, are some very practical suggestions about how you can go about putting ideas into practice.

There are 3 main sections: Horizons 1, 2 and 3. Horizon 1 is where you investigate what are the actual problems that need to be addressed. There are a range of suggestions about how you might find out what the problems are - and getting out amongst the people is one of the key strategies. This is a collaborative approach which involves forming a team and there are suggestions about how you might put together an effective team.

Horizon 2 is finding ways of addressing these problems - from how to gather a range of suggestions to how to prioritise which to address first. It also then gives a series of processes to go through to hone these solutions into workable practicalities.

Horizon 3 is where you decide what is the vision - referred to here as BHAG - Big Hairy Audacious Goal - what is worth putting all this time and effort into? Then when you have decided, there is a formula for the pitch - a practical way to present your idea but also assists in clarifying your thoughts so that you are always ensuring your solution is the one that will actually solve your actual problem - and not something else completely!!

So, instead of just generalised points on a circle or spiral, here are a range practical steps that you can pick and choose from to make your idea a reality. And they work because they have been tried and tested in a range of both educational and business settings.

- 4. The user: Who would use it? Who will it be designed to engage? Make them real - consider showing your original personas. Why do they want to use it? What would they gain/ achieve?*

So, who would use this? Anyone and everyone but especially exhausted educational leaders. This is a practical guide to making ideas a reality. One key suggestion is the 'It's in if' guide. This is a list of principles or guidelines that states, using concrete language, a list of criteria from your values that is actionable, checkable and unambiguous. This means people can act more autonomously. Anyone in the organisation can go ahead with an idea if the proposed idea meets these criteria. It means that people don't have to keep asking for permission and don't have to wait until the next SLT or BOT meeting for the go ahead. They can just get on with innovating.

There are such a range of suggestions for each step in the process that if that way of doing it doesn't get the desired results, there are lots of other ways to approach the same problem.

This process also invites others to be involved and to come up with problems and ideas that the leadership team might not even ever have thought of. There are lots of perspectives and lots ways of solving a problem that need to be considered.

5. Marketing: How will you let people know? What will the user experience be? What makes it unique - how will it stand out? Quantitative and qualitative value?

So, how will others in our organisation know about this? A presentation at a Friday PLD session and the installation of a visible thinking wall in a prominent place on the way to the staff room. Regular newsletter updates and a hui for interested parents on particular topics. An assembly presentation to all the students to invite them to be part of the process. A presentation to the Student Council so they can look at ideas that are presented to them.

It is unique because people will be able to see actual results happening because of this process.

6. The benefits: Who will it benefit and how? What is the qualitative and quantitative value proposition?

For the students, see changes in their programmes of learning and they will have some input into this. For parents, an opportunity to add ideas and solutions to issues that directly affect them. For staff, a collaborative approach where all have a voice to make known their issues and to make suggestions that will work for their particular situation. For SLT, a removal of the burden of being the solver of all the problems and a sharing of the load with the practical steps to assist to make things happen.

7. Future: Where might it lead?

An energised learning community where everyone is more able to participate and make their own future rather than have the future just happen to them.

8. You: Convince the audience you can deliver. Outline your previous experience. How would this project build on your experience?

I can deliver on this because I have seen the benefits already. The visible thinking wall helps give clarity of thought to ideas but also allows others to see what you are

thinking. I have led whole school change previously but this process gives a whole new range of practical steps that will help to make these ideas reality faster and, when I meet roadblocks, there are a range of other suggestions that I can refer to overcome them.

9. What do you want? Do you want people's money? Time? Energy? Nod in agreement? Where would an initial investment of \$ x take you, and what would you do next to take your idea further? What would you do if there was no follow-on investment? What will you do if people's time and energy lags later into the project, and they cannot offer the time they could at the beginning? Does your idea depend on their investment of time, energy or money, or will it work to some degree even if they are not on board? Make it clear what you are asking people to do next.

From this audience, what do I want? Two things really: 1. Genuine, honest feedback about ideas or issues around this idea that I might not have considered. Suggestions about other approaches that might work. 2. Anyone else who might be interested in this approach working with me to share ideas and reflections as we go about making ideas a reality.

10. Round-up: Bring all your ideas back together again. Why does this project have to happen?

This focus on building a culture of innovation is needed because it is too hard for a small group of people in leadership to be the ones coming up with all the ideas and the solutions to all the problems. At our college, we have a culture of compliant, dependent learners in our student body and this culture also, with a few exceptions, extends to our staff. This approach will give them the opportunity, the practical steps and the energy to become more innovative risk taking learners.

Giving a pitch follows the same structure, every time, but the format needn't be 'stand up and PowerPoint us'. The format could be a Keynote or a PowerPoint, but it might also be a movie, Slideshare with annotations, photo story or something else. Consider how you can bring people on board well in advance by sharing your learning journey before pitching, and then think about how you can socialise your pitch after the fact with the wider school community, and earn even more support for your ideas.

My next step is to see how we can incorporate these ideas into our newly endorsed North Shore Catholic Schools Community of Learning.

Reference list:

McIntosh, Ewan (2015). *How to come up with great ideas and actually make them happen*. Edinburgh: NoTosh Publications.