Quality Learning
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Volume 22

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Rationale:
This series purposely sets out to illustrate a range of approaches to Professional Learning and to highlight the importance of teachers and teacher educators taking the lead in reframing and responding to their practice, not just to illuminate the field but to foster genuine educational change.

Audience:
The series will be of interest to teachers, teacher educators and others in fields of professional practice as the context and practice of the pedagogue is the prime focus of such work. Professional Learning is closely aligned to much of the ideas associated with reflective practice, action research, practitioner inquiry and teacher as researcher.
Quality Learning

Teachers Changing Their Practice

Edited by

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It is with great pride and excitement that I introduce this book *Quality Learning: Teachers Changing Their Practice*. It seems rare within teacher professional learning these days that we see teachers not only engage in long-term quality professional learning, but also the opportunity for teachers to be supported to write about their experiences and to share their insights with the rest of the profession.

What strikes me most about the teachers’ writing in this book is that it is so focussed on connecting with what matters most in the hearts and minds of students. There is sharp recognition that student engagement with learning is so much more than setting fun activities for students. Instead the teachers show that the connection to learning comes from purposefully and deliberately allowing students to engage with deep questions of life, opening up spaces of meaning in order for students to critique, question, inquire, imagine and re-imagine themselves in today’s world.

This sort of sophisticated teaching and learning generally only comes about with teachers’ sustained and critical reflection on their own practice. We see coming through in the teachers’ chapters in this book the impact of teachers being given the time and space to go deeply into their practice, to trial new teaching procedures and behaviours, and continuously assess and refine what impacts most on their students.

This book has come about through a unique partnership between Monash University, St Joseph’s Parish Primary School Hawthorn, and Catholic Education Melbourne. It highlights what can be achieved when education systems, universities and teachers at the coalface collaborate together to improve student outcomes.

This book represents a rare insight into the learning journeys of teachers as skilled professionals, as they hone their practice, ever-learning and striving towards the growth and progress of every learner.

*Simon Lindsay*

*Catholic Education Melbourne*
SECTION 1
LEADING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
1. LEADING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

I believe that it is a unique privilege to lead a learning community. It is exciting, challenging, complex and indeed rewarding. The excitement comes from the opportunities we provide to students as we support their quest to be successful learners; learners that will understand, participate in and contribute to, their world. However, that excitement comes with a constant challenge of ensuring that the learning environment we plan for and create is meaningful and purposeful for every student. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that there is great complexity in the dynamics of the relationships associated with the role of being a teacher.

In our school, our learners come well equipped and eager to learn which provides us with a privileged starting point. But that privilege comes with a concomitant responsibility to ensure that, as the professionals entrusted with the development of these young learners, we too come to school eager and well equipped to do our work.

At a personal level, I have been fortunate to have worked, and continue to work with, educators who genuinely aspire to develop quality in teaching and learning. This concern to grow professionally is demonstrated by their willingness to take up opportunities for learning and co-operate and support their students and colleagues. Inherent in my role as principal is an enormous sense of responsibility to ensure that this attitude of professionalism is nurtured through leading a Professional Learning culture that respects both the role of the teacher and the learner in all of our educational endeavours.

In this book, the insights of many of teachers at our school make clear how they have developed their knowledge, skills and abilities borne of our professional learning culture. This chapter is designed to offer an understanding of that which led to the thinking and development underpinning that culture.

The understandings and attitudes apparent in each of the chapters, result from teachers being open to, and accepting of a culture that promotes alternative perspectives on pedagogical situations. This highlights the importance of professionally challenging the ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions of teaching and learning that can so easily simply reinforce the status-quo (Brookfield, 1995).

St Joseph’s is a school that is part of an educational system committed to Christian values that both shapes and influences our approach to working together. Within that context, our approach to professional learning has evolved from ‘going out’ to participate in external professional development (as is so common in the schooling
system), to one which accepts and values ourselves as formative learners and expert teachers who learn, share and test out ideas in our school. Such an understanding of our approach to professional growth has allowed our teachers to appreciate the complexities of learning and to embrace their roles with enthusiasm and vigour and function as highly dedicated professionals.

I have seen our teachers become open to ‘possibilities’ within their daily encounters; especially so when expressing alternative views or challenging previously unchallenged ideas. They have become more confident in embracing the many demands of the system, the school’s structures and organisational expectations. As a consequence, our overall capacity to respond to the educational needs of our students has grown.

The school based professional learning approach we have worked on and developed together, has impacted the very nature of our school’s culture and practices. That influence is evident in our collective approach in seeking to develop ‘conditions for learning’. Our professional learning culture is focused to better understand our roles whilst developing our knowledge, skills and attitudes, and thus building our capacity as educators. Through so doing, we are able to better meet the needs of each of our students.

**HOW WE STARTED**

… teaching quality can only be as good as the underlying conceptions of teaching, learning and schooling on which they are based. … narrow – and some would say impoverished – notions of teaching and learning do not account for the complexities at the heart of the educational enterprise … (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 4)

Our goal was to create a culture of respect, trust, hard work and commitment which would then define our learning environment. We expected that culture to be lived, and witnessed by all, within our community. Articulating and giving shape to what that culture then looked like required the dedication of a Leadership Team – a team that would be pivotal to successful implementation, support and sustainability.

As school leaders, we had become increasingly familiar with evidence in the educational literature which identified the role of the teacher as a key influence on student learning outcomes. With this information in mind, it was clear to us that building teachers’ capacities to be highly skilled and effective educators was what mattered to us all in developing our professional learning strategy. The intent of the leadership team was to build students’ capacities through building our teachers’ capacities. Principles of learning for both students and teachers emerged for us as one way of articulating and maintaining a learning focus and avoiding a ‘script or recipe type’ approach to development and change.

The guiding principles for *students* included:

- developing a desire to learn;
- seeing learning as trial and error (error being an integral part of the learning);
• seeing themselves as partners in learning rather than receivers of information; and,
• being able to think creatively about how to problem make and problem solve.

The guiding principles for teachers included:
• disrupting what had been accepted as the norm of teaching and learning (breaking out of the comfort zone); and,
• consistently asking, “What am I doing to build a love of learning in my students?”

By respecting our varied understandings and associated professional perspectives of practice, we sought to create a positive working environment that valued alternative ways of framing teaching and learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). As principal, I saw the need to create a culture in which teachers were supported in their growth both as learners and teachers. That view was based on seeing the parallel between teachers embarking on a learning pathway just in ways that reflected similar expectations for our students. Such a professional learning approach demanded respect for teachers as professionals with autonomy over their personal goals for self-improvement.

We became engaged in much professional dialogue and at times, heartfelt debates, through which we came to accept that we had actually been struggling with the task of delivering the prescribed curriculum in an authentic way. One aspect of those deliberations was a common view that it was difficult to justify the same input and outcomes in our core areas of English, Mathematics and Religious Education if they were to rightly dominate our face to face teaching time, in comparison to the remaining areas of the curriculum.

We decided that we wanted to take greater responsibility for how we managed the curriculum and how we would accommodate its demanding content across all of its subject areas. Arriving at that point as a professional judgment was empowering indeed. As a result, teachers began to see themselves as part of the educative process from a different perspective and realised that together we all had to do something in order to enact the curriculum in a more authentic way. In so doing, the complexity of teaching became more obvious to us all which, in turn, begged a more concerted effort in response both in our practice and the professional learning essential to supporting that practice.

Many of us have attended professional development (PD) programs over the years that have revolved around new ideas, new initiatives and new concepts. Such professional development is often experienced as ‘spray on PD’ (Mockler, 2005) designed to ‘fix’ teaching. What these programs often lack is a concern to genuinely develop teachers in ways that might impact their formation in a sustained, supportive and personal way. Sadly, because of the resource demands and different thinking necessary to support professional learning (PL), the majority of programs tend to adopt a PD approach designed to work ‘on teachers’ rather than the PL approach of working ‘with teachers’ (see, Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009 for a detailed description of differences between PD and PL).
From our perspective, and just as the principles outlined earlier suggest, we purposefully chose to commit to resource ways of working with our teachers and to build up their capabilities in understanding, accepting, implementing and contributing to our shared responsibility for enhanced student learning. Therefore, in many ways, our school could rightly be seen to have invested significantly in a PL approach based on valuing human capital (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008) and inviting teachers to join with us on a professional learning journey rather than a adopting a prescribed method for addressing a ‘particular situation’.

Our accepted reality was that the school can only do so much to build teachers’ capacity. Therefore, leadership must not just say that it trusts staff as professionals, it must be overtly clear that its actions demonstrate a commitment to supporting new learnings, new understandings and new expectations; as principal, that message and those actions are my responsibility. That matters for many reasons, not least because our students need us to be truly committed – especially if we are to expect the same of them.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

A key aspect of our approach to professional learning is to ensure that teachers are afforded the time and opportunity to engage in dialogue to develop deep understandings about content and pedagogy and, in so doing, set the conditions for learning at our school. The common notion of imposing expectations is replaced by working together for a shared responsibility to set an agreed ‘model for professional learning’ aimed at improved student learning outcomes.

I have come to accept that the complexity, breadth, depth and expectations of the primary school curriculum places demands on the school that must be understood and managed within our particular context. Although supported by our various systems to interpret and deliver the curriculum, each school has an individual responsibility to implement the structures, select the appropriate personnel, and commit resources appropriate to the needs and demands of its particular community. There is no one size fits all approach so ‘success’ is enmeshed when appropriate into consideration of the ‘specificness’ of our school and how best to influence student learning in that context. Hence, the importance of professional learning derived of a sensitivity to the school context, creating the conditions for learning, and trusting in the professionalism of teachers.

The overarching ideologies and particular focus of our system is expressed in our structural and organisational makeup. What we want to achieve for each and every student at our school requires the leadership of the school to be accepting of, and committed to, the core understandings and values of our system. Together we commit to achieving the highest standards possible for each learner, using data, research and evidence to ensure maximum progress and growth in each student’s learning. We want our students to be versatile learners, who develop not
only new knowledge and skills, but also new literacies, dispositions and cultural ‘awarenesses’ that will inspire them for all that life will bring to them. Learning within this context, and in dialogue with the Catholic tradition, offers all of us opportunities; not only to understand others, but ourselves, our identity and our faith more deeply.

Our professional learning focuses on building our teachers’ capacities in thinking about, planning for, and reflecting on their teaching. What I believe we have achieved, and is clearly evident in the chapters in this book, is a transformation of how we recognize and respond to our responsibilities as educators. We have become confident in making bold decisions about what we need to do and how we do it, and in how we see the role of our students and foster their responsibilities for learning.

The impact and influence of Kathy Smith through her long involvement with us as a leader of professional learning has helped us to create a culture for learning at our school. That combined with John Loughran’s support has been a catalyst for a learning culture which continues to evolve and challenge us all to see new possibilities and respond to their ideas in productive ways. As a consequence, we have grown in confidence and we approach our work from a perspective that not only encourages, but more so allows us, to support our students’ learning needs with much deeper insights based on an overt reflective stance.

CONCLUSION

As a principal, it can be difficult to assess one’s own effectiveness in supporting staff to build their capacities in interpreting, planning, delivering and assessing the various demands and expectations of the curriculum, and ultimately, the underpinning approach to, and practices of, learning and teaching. My personal view has always been that the better supported teachers are, the greater will be their capabilities in addressing the needs of their students, and the better the opportunity for them to succeed as learners.

Now as I read with pride the work of our teachers, I see how important it is to understand educational development through the lens of a professional learning community (PLC). DuFour and DuFour (2010), like many others in the literature, have drawn attention to ‘the three big ideas that underpin a PLC: (1) a commitment to high levels of learning for all students; (2) the imperative of a collaborative and a collective effort to fulfil commitment; and, (3) the intense focus on results that enables a school to respond to the needs of each student, inform teacher practice, and fuel continuous improvement’ (p. 77). I believe that through our approach to professional learning, we have evolved as educators and whilst we remain committed to our profession and our roles in school, I am sure we will continue to build our capacities and become better informed about what it really means to support quality in learning and teaching.
REFERENCES


Gilbert Keisler
Principal
INTRODUCTION

Framing teaching as a ‘craft’ is an interesting idea and one that has been widely discussed in educational literature (Grimmett, 1992; Hoffman-Kipp, 2003; Kelchtermans, 2009; Pratte, 1991). On a number of levels this notion resonates with what I value about my professional practice, an acquired expertise that is carefully passed on through dialogue and modelling with skills that are cultivated and refined over years.

Over twenty years of working within the teaching profession, this thinking has guided my efforts to improve my teaching. Through ongoing reflection and evaluation, I have continually tried to hone the technical aspects of my practice. I have always paid attention to my choice of planned activities. I have tried to reconsider the questions I choose to ask; the assessment tasks I use; and, the feedback I provide. All of the questioning and reflection on my practice is driven by the constant need to make judgements about how well my students are progressing and how that looks in comparison to what I anticipate might be their learning trajectory. I have endeavoured to reflect in this way in order to better inform my development as a teacher and to build on what has gone before.

Like most teachers, as I look back on my teaching I have my success stories, but I also acknowledge that there have been many times when my teaching could have more effectively met the learning needs of my students. It was this thinking that made me look carefully at how I engaged in professional reflection and evaluation. I began to notice that the focus of my thinking has always been firmly fixed on me: my planning; my delivery; my questioning; my assessment tasks; my documentation; my plenaries; and, the feedback I provide.

Whilst I did this with the best intentions for my students and their learning, it seems that throughout my career my reflection and evaluation has always focused primarily on the activities of my teaching. Focusing only on what I was doing, left little scope for me to effectively notice what was actually happening for the learners in my classes, in particular, how they were experiencing learning and how they were working to construct understanding. I began to wonder what might happen if I paid less attention to teaching and more attention to learning.
As I slowly shifted this focus, I began to see my students differently and this new lens began to magnify opportunities for powerful learning. This adjustment refocused my reflections and allowed me to better understand not only what my students were learning but also how they were learning.

At St Joseph’s, placing the learner at the centre of our professional dialogue and practice has become a shared focus for all teachers. So as I was reframing my thinking, I was fortunate to be working with teachers who also shared a similar desire to think differently about their practice.

As we began to consciously position student learning at the centre of our professional dialogue, our planning conversations began to change. We began thinking and talking more deeply about what matters for quality learning and to more seriously consider what that might mean for our teaching. This work has shaped our purpose as teachers; we now collectively have high expectations for student learning and actively seek ways to support such learning.

Our school leadership supports a learning culture where teachers are expected reflect on their practice by considering the quality of the learning opportunities they provide for their students in every curriculum area. This chapter examines how working in this way has informed our professional thinking as teachers and has shaped our practice across our school.

THE LEARNER: WHAT WE VALUE AND ATTEND TO AT ST JOSEPH’S

A number of key themes have emerged that characterize the work we do at St Joseph’s and the decisions we make about what matters for our students’ learning. Together, teachers work to:

1. prepare students for an uncertain future, explicitly considering the implications this intention has for curriculum planning;
2. consider the needs of our students, in particular how their contextual reality influences what they need to learn;
3. create effective conditions that will develop meaningful student learning; and,
4. focus all teaching to achieve personalised learning for all students.

Preparing Students for an Uncertain Future

We often hear unsettling reports in the media about the uncertain nature of future workforces in our society, in particular the importance of yet unknown technology and hence the dispositions and thinking skills employees will require to not only cope but be innovative and successful (Griffin, 2012; McWilliam, 2008; Thomson, 2011). It is common for Teacher Professional Learning Sessions and Parent Information Evenings to include a short video outlining occupations that did not exist ten years ago; developed to meet a need in our changing society. Helping our students face such an uncertain future raises a number of questions for their learning: “How do
we, as teachers, prepare students for occupations that presently don’t exist?”; “What knowledge, skills and attributes will such roles require?”; “How can we anticipate such learning needs when the future remains uncertain or ill defined?”; and, “What learning opportunities will appropriately support students to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they need?” Parents and teachers alike are conscious of the changing nature of work; a lifetime career in a particular occupation is highly unlikely for today’s students.

With a vastly uncertain working life looming for today’s students, any teaching that maintains a fixed focus on curriculum content alone is no longer sufficient. Locally, curriculum changes have been made in an attempt to highlight the need to address this challenge through the inclusion of such capabilities as Creative and Critical Thinking, Ethical, Intercultural and Personal and Social Capabilities often as a set of discrete knowledge and skills taught explicitly in and through the learning areas (Victorian Curriculum Foundation to year 10, 2016).

As teachers we must continually determine the skills, knowledge, dispositions and understandings our learners need as we prepare them to engage with their world. At St Joseph’s we openly discuss these concerns and acknowledge that to face what appears to be an uncertain future, our students will require attributes that enable them to develop the critical thinking, creativity and problem solving skills that can be applied in various situations.

At St Joseph’s one way in which we attempt to face this challenge is by organizing curriculum through the Multi Domain approach. The remaining areas of curriculum are planned and taught through a whole school approach which builds inquiry units around eight key concepts. These eight units take place across a two-year cycle. The eight concepts which frame these units are: Identity and Diversity; Relationships; Systems; Wellbeing; Place; Change; Sustainability and Decision Making. These concepts are deliberately broad to provide teachers with opportunity to not only plan together to meet curriculum requirements across grade levels but to also meet the specific learning needs and interests of students within each class.

Working together, teachers at each year level within the school develop learning intentions related to these concepts. These learning intentions are expressed as key understandings and align with selected content from the mandated curriculum. These understandings provide a shared learning focus for each unit. Each teacher attends to these understandings by using the key concept, e.g. ‘Relationships’ to create a context for student learning that is meaningful and relevant to the students in their class, engaging their students’ interests and current knowledge.

Teachers also determine how best to use this context to promote rich questions from their students and in this way ensure that curriculum content becomes personalized – developed in ways which align with students’ individual needs and experiences. While the learning experiences and developmental focus of each class may be differentiated, the overall learning intentions for each year level remain the same. Staff are expected to have a thorough knowledge of the required curriculum expectations, i.e., curriculum expectations as outlined for their Grade level as well
as those for the previous and following Grades. This enables teachers to more effectively scaffold student learning.

Using eight concepts to inform the selection of content does however pose a tension for teachers and leadership. This tension arises between students' entitlement to the whole curriculum, and the magnitude of expectations that make up the mandated curriculum.

The crowded curriculum is indeed an apt description for the expectations imposed on schools through nationally developed curriculum documents. Expecting teachers to effectively attend to all the mandated curriculum runs the risk of cultivating a culture of checklists, whereby skills and knowledge are products that can be (need to be) ticked off when ‘learnt’ by students, or even less ideally, when taught by teachers.

At St Joseph’s, through our professional dialogue, we have questioned the necessity of exposing students to all of the knowledge, skills and understandings as set out in curriculum documents. We want to focus on what they need for their future and we are also acutely aware that time constraints can potentially restrict opportunities for deep learning.

The leadership team has determined that attending to less curriculum content and developing more meaningful and rich understandings is the preferred alternative for our school setting. In response teachers have been released from the pressures of meeting all requirements of a crowded curriculum and have permission to reduce the breadth of content covered in favour of deep learning.

Given our philosophy of personalised learning, the challenge has become, “How do we determine what elements of the curriculum to include and perhaps more importantly, what to omit?” As we have come to see, responding to this challenge poses more questions as we grapple with the notion of deep learning and how we create the conditions for this to occur. Together in our professional dialogue sessions we continue to explore this issue and remind ourselves that our students and the quality of their learning must always remain the focus of our planning and decision making.

Consider the Needs of Our Students, in Particular How Their Contextual Reality Influences What They Need to Learn

At St Joseph’s teachers are encouraged and supported to think deeply about what learning matters for our students. We have grappled with the question of ‘why we do what we do?’ As described in the previous section, teachers select curriculum according to understandings which are developed through eight key concepts, but we are continually reflecting on the question of what learning matters for our students at this time? This thinking drives decisions about the relevance and importance of selected curriculum content.

The school leadership team, and then the staff as a whole, have spent time delving deeply into determining the attributes and dispositions we aspire for our students.
We have considered the contextual reality of our school, the current social context that defines the larger world and the uncertain future our students may face. As a Catholic school, our beliefs and values about individuals’ relationship with God influences decisions we make for our community and the actions we undertake in our dealings with others. With this thinking in mind we have agreed upon five aspirational dispositions that define the inherent qualities of mind and character that we value for our students.

While acknowledging the important partnership that exists between home and school in the formation of our students, after seven years of primary school education we hope that our students will leave as learners who will:

1. have conviction to serve with dignity;
2. be flexible and responsive to circumstances;
3. be creative and critical thinkers;
4. be effective and articulate communicators; and,
5. be informed and active citizens.

These aspirational dispositions have become the lens through which our teachers determine what they need to attend to in every aspect of learning and teaching. These dispositions are not a definitive list, however, they are what we have come to see as important for our learners, in our community, at this time. So together with the understandings discussed in the previous section, these dispositions help our teachers to select and work productively with curriculum content.

Creating Conditions for Learning

Over recent years we have focused our professional learning on expert teaching and what makes an expert teacher. As a staff we have unpacked chapters of “What Expert Teachers Do” (Loughran, 2010) and used some chapters from this book to frame our Multi Domain planning documents. The natural progression from our conversations about expert teaching has been a powerful shift to discussions about how to help teachers cultivate expert learners. As a staff we have engaged in robust dialogue questioning such things as: “What makes an expert learner?” and, “What makes a learner successful?” As a consequence of those considerations we have discussed such things as the influences on our students’ ability to: ask questions; reflect on their learning; set goals; take ownership of their own learning; collaborate with others; share their understandings; or perhaps, take action.

In many schools, teacher release time is spent planning lessons, with discussions centred on selecting activities that allow students to demonstrate mastery of a particular concept. At St Joseph’s, planning sessions for Multi Domain are deliberately referred to as ‘dialogue’. Facilitated by Kathy Smith, the dialogue begins with broadening teachers’ understandings of a particular concept which then moves the focus firmly to the student as learner (see for example, Chapter 3: Teacher
Professional Learning). Teachers working at the same year level work as a team, discussing the understandings they want their students to develop and the ways they plan to provide experiences which will immerse students in the given concept (see Chapter 6). At all times, discussion is focused on the conditions the teachers will create to prompt and probe student thinking to support rich learning.

The value of this collegial dialogue has only been made possible due to the structure and supports put in place by the school’s leadership team. The sessions occur regularly; each session is allocated a substantial amount of time and casual relief teachers are employed to ensure the classroom program can continue uninterrupted. Teachers know that this form of professional learning is highly valued because the school leadership has embedded and supported this approach with organisational structures within the school’s formal operation and programming.

Another crucial element to the success of this dialogue has been the development of a culture of mutual respect within teams and a shared language amongst the whole staff. The pedagogical reasoning teachers use to inform decisions made for each learner is couched within some agreed conditions for learning.

Together with Kathy Smith, the staff discussed what it might mean and then developed and articulated specific conditions they considered important for authentic learning. Recognizing the ways in which conditions for learning make a difference has become increasingly evident to us through the ways in which students develop particular skills, knowledge, understandings and behaviours. To facilitate such learning, teachers:

1. create a learning environment that promotes student voice and provide opportunities for students to take action;
2. develop lines of interest that connect to overall understandings;
3. attend to the importance of pre-assessment data, using this information to shape learning;
4. see each inquiry as an opportunity for personal and professional learning, an opportunity to work together to brainstorm and become oriented to a topic;
5. create conditions for deep learning;
6. value and build on student opinion and thinking;
7. scaffold students’ skill development to enable each student to reach increasingly sophisticated skill levels;
8. give students the permission, authority, knowledge and opportunities to become independent learners;
9. nurture each student’s personal and interpersonal skill development;
10. incorporate student voice in learning and assessment; and,
11. identify a clear purpose for learning.

As further described in Chapter 9 these conditions are created by teachers to facilitate a classroom culture of inquiry which provides learning opportunities specifically designed to meet the needs of each student.
A Focus on Personalised Learning for All Students

The teachers at St Joseph’s place great importance on personalising learning for all students. We acknowledge that children come to school with different needs, different interests, different experiences, different expectations and different ways of learning. Therefore, we need to be highly skilled in noticing (Mason, 2002) in order to pay attention to that which is required for each learner to experience success. We must then be able to effectively enact that which is derived of that level of noticing. Doing so though presents pedagogical challenges because in a contemporary educational setting, as we work to determine what each student is ready to learn, what content is appropriate and how we can maximize the learning opportunities for each individual, we must simultaneously also be paying close attention to how each learner is making sense of their experiences. Insights into learning and teaching in this way change that which a teacher notices, and as a consequence how they practice and how it influences the nature of student learning.

In striving to respond to these challenges (noted above) and by remaining focused on the learner, it becomes immediately obvious that as teachers we must place the learner at the centre of our pedagogical decision making. That way, students can be actively involved and engaged in their learning, and ensure that our hopes and expectations for learning and teaching are more than rhetoric alone. In so doing, we purposefully take time to consider key questions such as: “What interests the student?”; “What questions do they have?”; “What goals do they have for themselves as learners?”; and, “How does this align with the mandated curriculum requirements and expectations?” We acknowledge the diversity of our students, and the importance of the pedagogical decisions we make to create conditions that allow all learners to access the curriculum in ways that meets their learning needs and develops their learning potential. Our teaching is the vehicle through which quality learning of this kind develops. Nurturing quality learning is a continuous, demanding and challenging process; it also captures some of what it means to be an expert teacher.

Through the inquiry approach we use in teaching the Multi Domain component of the curriculum, we are better able to personalise learning to the individual. Across a ten-week term, weeks 1–4 are taught using a guided inquiry approach. During this time, teachers refer to specific components of the mandated curriculum which are related to both the key concept which frames the inquiry unit, the understandings and the dispositions. During Weeks 5–8 students follow a more personal line of inquiry related to the concept. This may occur individually, or in small groups and all the while teachers monitor and question students as they work to support their learning and exploration of the key understandings. Finally, weeks 9 and 10 are typically a celebration of learning and an opportunity for more explicit teaching if required.
CONCLUSION

I set out to focus my professional thinking around student learning. This was easy for me to achieve when I found I was working in a school that supported and trusted teachers to make decisions about what mattered for their students. Working with my colleagues we have a shared understanding about quality learning and we talk about our practice in new ways.

In many schools there is a Teaching and Learning Leader, but at St Joseph’s I have the role of Learning and Teaching Leader. I believe that this is not just a case of semantics but a declaration that at St Joseph’s we place student learning at the centre of all that we do.

When I first took up this position, I saw my role as supporting our teachers to be the best they could be. This meant facilitating opportunities for reflection and dialogue about contemporary approaches to pedagogy, curriculum content and student progression. These aspects of my role are still important but I now see the priority and value of every pedagogical conversation beginning and ending with the learner.

At St Joseph’s we strive for continual improvement in all that we do. As a leadership team we have given our teachers ‘permission’ to reflect on what learning matters for their students in their particular context. I now see that through our approach to aspirational dispositions we create conditions for deep learning that make a difference for students – collectively, and perhaps even more importantly, as individuals.

NOTE

1 Domains are distinct bodies of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Science, History, Civics and Citizenship and The Humanities are examples of the different domains. Multi Domain means attending to more than one domain in a unit of work. Multi domain units work to provide learning experiences that enable students to link key ideas across curriculum areas.

REFERENCES


SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM TEACHING TO LEARNING


*Andrea Dineen*
*Deputy Principal*
3. TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Changing the Routines of Practice

THE BEGINNING – TRYING TO WORK DIFFERENTLY

Team meeting: Laptops up, teachers sit around a table and we are all ready to go … or is that just a signal that they are simply moving to a passive listening mode?

When I started in the role as Director of Learning at St Joseph’s Primary School I was responsible for building capacity in teaching, i.e., directing teachers’ learning so that they could have a greater positive impact on students. My plan (back then) was to implement the model that had been successful at my previous school; it had worked there, I knew what to do and was comfortable with how to do it. The model focused on developing Multi Domain units that brought together the curriculum areas of Science, The Humanities (History, Geography, Economics) and Civics & Citizenship with a particular emphasis on science.

Each term the whole school worked together developing an inquiry unit and each unit was based around a concept or big idea which included: Change; Relationships; Systems; Identity & Diversity; Wellbeing; Place; Decision Making; and, Sustainability. These units were designed to meet the learning needs of students at each year level whilst also attending to the requirements of the mandated curriculum.

Teachers working at the same year level were released from teaching duties twice within a term (a term being a ten week teaching block). In the first release time they worked together to enter into dialogue about the concept that was the focus of their unit of work. This dialogue aimed to deepen their personal understanding of key ideas related to the concept and from this thinking teachers then collectively identified key understandings for student learning. Teachers were required to have read the curriculum relevant to their grade level and bring evidence of students’ prior knowledge of the concept, i.e. diagnostic assessment data, to ensure that the unit of work would be designed to develop new learning for the students.

Teachers would then again be released from teaching to meet at the end of the term. In this second meeting they would discuss evidence, captured in student work samples, which demonstrated the degree to which students had met the stated understandings. That information was then used as a prompt to promote discussion.
about how planning would flow into the development of the next term’s unit of work, again designed around a different concept.

I sought the expertise of the curriculum leader from my previous school, Cathy Dimitrakopolus and we began working together in the Multi Domain planning sessions with the St Joseph’s staff. I believed that bringing a critical friend in on a regular basis would have a greater impact on the staff rather than if I worked alone to lead the planning sessions. I could then act as the mediator between the teachers and the critical friend, observing, listening, and making connections; in essence looking to pick up on that which resonated with, and/or, challenged our teachers. This structure also gave me the opportunity to be a learner along with my colleagues and to better grasp how the ideas, process and anticipated outcomes were shaping thinking and practice.

It soon became clear to me that the teachers were familiar with the curriculum and aware of the need to align their teaching with their expectations of the learning outcomes but they rarely engaged in dialogue about the focus concept. Most teachers didn’t seem to see a need for, or understand the value of, such talk. For quite some time I struggled with the ‘sound of silence’. I felt uncomfortable – as I am sure the teachers did too.

Many times a question would just ‘hang’ in the void of silence. Laptop screens provided comfort; but that veneer of comfort was quickly betrayed by squirming in seats. I continued to be enthusiastic because I believed that exploring the concept through dialogue would be beneficial.

My understanding of dialogue was that it involved meaningfully engaging in conversation with another, actively listening, respectfully challenging, building on ideas, probing to seek deeper understandings and new learning. Most importantly dialogue for me was about valuing the talk and respecting what the other has to say. I thought that taking time to think about what we as teachers know about a teaching focus would surely encourage a sharing of ideas and help develop deeper understandings of learning and teaching. I was sure that through this process teachers would take this new thinking into the classroom and, as a result, add value to their teaching. So why did the silence remain? What was I doing wrong? Was I holding these teachers back? How was I going to bring them on board with this approach? Why did I think this was the best way to build teachers’ capacity?

REFLECTION: WHAT WAS HAPPENING?

As I look back on it now, I wish that I had paid closer attention to the ‘sounds of silence’. I could’ve carefully unwrapped it like a precious gift. It makes me wonder what I might have learnt about teacher thinking and how I could have used those insights to encourage them to respond differently to the learning opportunity I thought I was creating.

While I might have had a vision that these sessions would promote rich dialogue, I don’t think I effectively shared my thinking about the purpose for, and hopes of,
TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

these sessions with the teachers. As I think about it now, I’m not sure if they even knew why they had come along – something that is obvious in the following quote from a colleague:

Initially the concept of ‘professional dialogue’ was very foreign and quite overwhelming, given I had no real understanding of what this actually meant or entailed. Along with many other teachers, I was thinking ‘what is this?’ And ‘what exactly are we expected to do?’ However, over time, these regular opportunities for rich conversations about student learning, led to more explicit teaching and is now something that is embedded in the culture of the school. Teachers no longer fear the unknown and embrace these sessions in the way in which they were intended.

Even though these sessions were designed to engage teachers in dialogue about the concept so that they could gain more diverse and deeper understandings, they seemed to be unsure of why dialogue mattered. They were no doubt asking themselves, “Why are we spending precious classroom time talking about the ‘concept’ without even planning one activity?

Now I can see that perhaps unpacking the why may have given teachers some insight into how to move forward. Doing so may have helped them to find their own way to grapple with this new approach, to see how it might have been beneficial for their teaching and enhance the learning of their students. Given time to investigate the ‘why’ and to see and better understand the purpose, teachers may have been more willing and ready to learn.

The sessions were called ‘Multi Domain Planning’ – the language of which may have sent a message that they were there to complete planning documents. Perhaps they saw these conversations as just talk and that they were losing valuable time; time essential to completing planning. I wanted teachers to have a chance to know and value these Multi Domain Planning sessions as professional learning. Maybe I should have given the sessions a different name. Maybe I should have explicitly labelled these times as professional learning. Perhaps my desire to ‘get the ball rolling’ and lead the work was a mistake. As I think about it now, I wonder if I had the ball but didn’t really have a vision about how to use it strategically?

Ownership of the sessions was also another blocker. In retrospect I owned the sessions; I set up the sessions and planned the content. Teachers were given time to come along and participate but from the beginning they had little ownership of what was taking place. The ‘power’ resided with me. I was leading and felt that I had to perform. What I failed to see was that this arrangement created conditions that encouraged teachers to be passive; I had set them up to listen.

Team meeting: Laptops up … ready to go … engaging in professional learning … that’s more like it.

As I began to see the situation anew and as I began to consider what was needed to change the situation I started to ask different questions: “How could I create the
conditions for teachers to develop their professional expertise and sense of self efficacy”; and more importantly, “How could I ensure that teacher professional learning would add value to student learning?”

THE POWER OF ENGAGEMENT

In planting seeds for meaningful teacher dialogue, they began to look beyond their laptop screens.

I began to think that it was important for teachers themselves to see and feel the excitement of learning and to be reminded about how that excitement happens beyond the classroom. With this in mind I decided to move beyond the school and find opportunities for learning beyond the familiar classroom routines.

In my endeavour to engage teachers and encourage them to think laterally about concepts, I organised staff immersion experiences; opportunities where teachers were immersed in or surrounded by the ideas they would be teaching. We explored the concept of ‘Sustainability’ together by getting on a bus and heading into the city. With refreshments all wrapped in sustainable packaging (to ‘sustain us’) on the journey, we investigated sustainability via a quiz, noticing sustainability in the streets of Melbourne.

A guided tour around The Ian Potter Gallery (a gallery which displays an Australian collection of artworks) challenged our thinking as we considered through visual art the sustainability practices of our indigenous population. We adopted an architectural lens and listened to a talk about the construction of the Eureka Tower, a 297 metre skyscraper located in the city of Melbourne, in particular the materials the developers used in construction of the tower. We were given a different perspective on sustainability in Melbourne as we travelled to the top of the building at night and stood on the Eureka Viewing deck.

Coming to the table to learn in a meaningful and authentic way took a long time, but the excursion experience was a success. It led to a shift in our conversations and enabled us to think differently and required more than just moving to different locations. Our conversations were changing and we were part of an evolving professional learning process.

CHANGING CONVERSATIONS

At times I felt extremely challenged and perplexed as to how I could best respond to some teachers who were not seeing the value in the sessions. As a member of the school leadership team, teachers were looking to me for leadership and I was supposed to have the answers.

My role really started to change when I began to feel comfortable with the fact that I didn’t have to know everything. When Kathy Smith became our External Critical Friend with responsibility for leading us in our thinking about Multi Domain through a scientific lens, I noticed a difference in how she interacted with teachers.
She demonstrated skills in inviting people into the conversation, acknowledging and respecting what they said while skilfully probing to go deeper with an idea, seeking justification and clarity in thinking.

It was immediately obvious to me that Kathy always valued teachers’ voices and expertise. Her starting point and her ‘throughline’ carried across all conversations regardless of the unit topics being discussed. This is when I really started to sit back and notice the conditions that nurtured meaningful professional learning. My listening became more attuned to what teachers were saying and I aimed to ask more inquisitive questions to support their thinking rather than just making a comment about what I knew. For example, a colleague commented:

It’s taken awhile, but now I see the purpose, I feel more value in them and how it can improve what I do in the classroom.

I began to notice at this time that a key factor that I had been missing was feedback and evidence. If I was to be leading teacher learning, then how did I know if what we were doing was working for them in their practice? How did I know whether or not it was improving student outcomes? I focused my attention on determining what sense and value teachers were making of the experience.

As I reflected on teacher feedback I noticed that they wanted more specific information about how to attend to the curriculum. I provided some professional reading about how teachers know the curriculum and how teachers skilfully construct units of inquiry that attend to the curriculum. I quickly noticed how professional reading matters but if used isolation it can tend not to lead anywhere so I decided to embed the reading in the context of our planning days – that proved to be much more useful.

Other feedback also drew attention to the need to view the curriculum in the session and have time to develop activities to support the content in the curriculum documents. While I acknowledged this as a concern for some I was increasingly of the view that the hour for dialogue was beginning to have great impact on teacher learning. Balancing both perspectives led to teachers viewing the curriculum prior to Multi Domain sessions and then following up on planning activities after the sessions in their own level planning time. In this way we maintained teacher dialogue as the focus of our sessions but still met some of the needs for planning activities.

Reflecting now on why I was so strong that the sessions remained ‘true’ to teacher dialogue brings me to the point that teachers have a great deal of expertise, knowledge and skill, and that given opportunities and conducive conditions, they willingly work together to examine their teaching and its relationship to their students’ learning. In so doing, they analyse what’s important for their students to learn and the support necessary to enhance such learning. It gives teachers quality time to examine the complex business of teaching and learning; permission to be confused, enlightened, and create new thinking about their own teaching and learning (DuFour & DuFour, 2010).
I now know that our Multi Domain dialogue sessions had a powerful impact on teachers’ learning and teaching. How do I know that? The conversation and teachers’ personal investment changed and grew over time. Across 15 classes, teachers worked to develop a shared language about learning and teaching. They started using similar tools and strategies to elicit prior knowledge, value student voice, and regularly check and track student learning. They began to explicitly talk about what they noticed in their teaching and their students’ learning, and they began sharing ideas, strategies and concerns with their colleagues.

Over the seven years I have been involved in this work there has been a significant change in our collective thinking. We started thinking Multi Domain planning was about thinking divergently about the concept with science as a focus. We then started to view the concept more through a scientific lens. The conditions for learning evolved from these discussions with teachers dialogue about how students learn best and what we needed to do to set up the best environment and conditions for students to be inquisitive, curious and active in their learning. We then came to the realisation (once again through conversation), that these Multi Domain sessions were about deeper considerations of the nature of quality in learning and teaching.

These sessions gave teachers an opportunity to inquire into their own classroom practice in a real and meaningful way. Teachers were not only encouraged but felt comfortable in ‘getting into the muddy waters’ of learning and teaching. Exploring ‘their’ challenges, grappling with the complexity of their teaching and their students’ learning, was the business of our conversations and attending to these issues was embedded in our planning. We were engaged in meaningful professional learning.

PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE ABOUT LEARNING

At the centre of our professional learning has always been the growth and development of our students. We all believe that student outcomes are what matters most, not only academic but just as importantly, attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. At the beginning and end of each unit of work, teachers now bring evidence of student thinking and learning to our Multi Domain sessions. Early in the term teachers bring work samples that capture students’ prior knowledge, i.e., what students already know about the concept, and what they would like to know – their questions and wonderings. From this information and with the curriculum requirements in mind, teachers identify the key understandings that will frame the unit.

Towards the end of the unit, in the second Multi Domain session, teachers bring evidence of how the children have demonstrated these understandings. Teachers look for evidence of students’ comprehension of these understandings and they identify the degree of new learning that has occurred for each child. A common task undertaken at the beginning of the unit of work is when each child writes/draws what they know about the concept then at the end of the unit they use a different colour pencil to write what they now know about the concept. This makes the child’s new learning visible.
Evidence of student learning is also clear in the way they work together to construct a shared definition of the concept and shows how their thinking evolves over the life of the unit. At the beginning of the term some classes work together to construct a definition of the concept under investigation and at different points throughout the term the children revisit the definition and, if needed, modify their collective thinking. Some classes have a wondering/question wall that is their reference point during the unit of work. Teachers and students constantly touch base with the wall noting the questions they are exploring or eliciting ideas for further exploration.

Teacher conversations place the learning first (DuFour & DuFour, 2010) and we do that by asking questions such as: “What is new learning for each child?”; “Is the new learning a shift in a child’s definition of the concept?”; and, “How does such thinking indicate a deeper understanding of the concept?” Learning is valued first, then we attend to the teaching. Together we discuss the conditions needed to create and scaffold student thinking and ensure that the students continue to feel comfortable to voice their ideas and understandings.

POSITIONING TEACHERS AS EXPERTS

Valuing teachers as experts has given me great satisfaction as a leader. Our teachers have made the Multi Domain Dialogue sessions their own and teachers and leaders have continued to shape the sessions to best meet the needs of staff. There is openness and trust and teachers are eager to share their ideas, successes, failures, and insecurities, knowing that they are in the process together, supporting one another. Teachers value the time to develop knowledge of their practice. They acknowledge their expertise and increasingly recognize and refine it through their interactions with students and colleagues. They actively shape their teaching as they teach; responding to the needs of each student and making informed decisions about how best to enhance learning (Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Recently we were given the opportunity to showcase the power of these Multi Domain Dialogue sessions when we had 50 teachers from 18 schools around the State visit us. We used a ‘fishbowl’ approach to illustrate how our teachers undertake dialogue sessions. With our teachers at the centre of the circle and the visiting teachers making up the outer circle around them, the ‘fishbowl’ demonstrated different stages of a dialogue session.

Initially our teachers were a little uncomfortable knowing an audience was listening to their interactions, but their expertise and emotional connection to the content quickly had them engaged in robust dialogue. The feedback was incredible! The observers were impressed at how professionally our teachers respectfully challenged one another and confidently put their teaching under the microscope for all to see and critique. There was also admiration for the way they built upon each other’s ideas, constructing new and shared learning about their practice. When learning conditions encourage mutual trust and openness, no matter how muddy
the waters or how confusing the task, great bonds can be formed and meaningful learning can happen. That is the nature of professional learning in which we are now engaged. – a far cry from ‘lap tops up and a passive learning mode’.

CONCLUSION: LEADING TEACHER LEARNING

My drive and passion for Dialogue sessions comes from knowing that the students are the beneficiaries of all the openness and energy that our teachers invest in these sessions. They now have the opportunity to engage in authentic and meaningful professional learning by bringing their professional knowledge of practice to bear in analysing and making plans that further develop their students’ knowledge, understandings, skills and experiences. In these sessions teachers take ownership of their learning by critically reflecting on what they know and don’t know; what’s important and what’s not; and, crucially why they are making certain decisions about learning and teaching. They have the freedom and professional autonomy to try out new ideas, make mistakes and continually weave their way through those complexities to give their students learning opportunities that matter.

What has underpinned our extended professional learning journey is our collective endeavour and tenacity to ‘do it better’ and make a positive difference for each child. As I trust this chapter makes clear, it hasn’t always been an easy journey. There have been many bumps along the road, but what has sustained us is belief in the journey itself.

Quality learning and teaching is never just reached. It can’t just be ticked off a checklist. It is not something completed in order to simply move onto the next goal. Quality in learning and teaching evolves through new thinking and challenges. It is not hard to see that learning and teaching is complex business. They exist in a dynamic relationship that demands a great deal of teachers’ knowledge, skills, and expertise to navigate.

Our professional learning journey has been powerful because it is a whole school approach. We have embarked on a journey together through which we have built trust, recognized and acknowledged teachers’ expertise and increasingly bought into the value of robust dialogue about practice. It has made a difference to what we do, how and why, to both ourselves as professionals and our students as informed and capable learners.

NOTE

1 Domains are distinct bodies of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Science, History, Civics and Citizenship and The Humanities are examples of the different domains. Multi Domain means attending to more than one domain in a unit of work. Multi domain units work to provide learning experiences that enable students to link key ideas across curriculum areas.
REFERENCES


*Sharon Kenyon-Smith
Deputy Principal*
INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the learning conditions that enable teachers to work together and deepen the understanding of their professional practice. As evident in this book, the teachers at St Joseph’s display a wide range of professional knowledge and expertise, and they are not only purposeful in their teaching but are able to clearly articulate what they value in terms of quality learning. Yet the professional knowledge of practice that teachers share in each of these chapters was once deeply embedded within their everyday teaching; it was tacit knowledge.

Their everyday knowledge of practice was made explicit and articulated because they were supported and encouraged to: think differently about their teaching experience; engage in critical reflection; develop a shared language to talk about their practice; and, become active decision makers about ‘the learning that matters’ for their students. That explication of their knowledge of practice has been possible due to the ongoing support they received from school leadership – in most part because leadership trusted them as professionals to responsibly lead student learning. Such an investment has been maintained by the school Principal and Deputy Principals who work to provide school-based opportunities that enable staff to work and learn together.

Within this culture of collaboration, my role has been to contribute as an external critical friend to their teacher professional learning in particular ways. It has been my role to facilitate regular, thought provoking and interactive professional dialogue among staff, in an attempt to: expose teachers’ thinking and beliefs about learning and teaching; challenge deeply held assumptions about the role of the teacher and the student; capture and examine teacher thinking; and, ultimately extend teacher professional knowledge. Essentially as we have worked together I have attempted to anticipate, determine and capitalize on moments which empower teachers to make decisions about the professional action they value. Through these discussions teachers have been supported in determining and articulating what they ‘feel matters’ for their students’ learning followed by actively addressing what that might mean for their teaching.

Insights about this collaborative learning process and the emergent knowledge and understandings teachers develop about the interactive relationship between
learning and teaching, has much to contribute to educational discourse beyond the school setting. Some of that knowledge is shared in this chapter.

VALUING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

At St Joseph’s Primary School, the school leadership trusts teachers to think and work as professionals and they overtly recognise the complexity of both teacher learning and the knowledge that drives teachers’ practice. The school values these aspects of teaching and gives real time for teachers to step back from the busyness of their classroom duties in order to engage in rich conversations about their teaching.

For those outside of teaching there may well be an assumption that teachers would naturally engage in conversations about learning and teaching across their normal working day, therefore providing time for such conversations may seem superfluous. However, the reality of the daily busyness of school-based teaching means there is little to no time for teachers to go beyond the ‘what’ of teaching. Therefore, through no fault of their own, on a daily basis, teacher conversations tend to be more operational by nature, i.e., they talk about what they are doing, what they need in terms of resources and activities and where and when events take place (Smith, 2017). Teachers rarely have time together to discuss why they work in certain ways and why that matters for student learning. The multi domain dialogue sessions at St Joseph’s allow teachers to take time away from classroom responsibilities and actively talk with each other. They share the beliefs and values they hold about learning, why those values matter, how their contextual reality impacts this thinking, and what they must attend to in order to create learning opportunities that align with such beliefs. In particular, teachers are given the opportunity and support to explore how they will ultimately frame unit topics and ideas so as to challenge and deepen student understanding, ensure their students develop new knowledge and enhance their skill development.

I have been privileged as an external education consultant to work with the teachers at St Joseph’s and have done so for 5 years. At regular times throughout the school year we meet to plan and discuss their teaching and their students’ learning. In our sessions, teachers draw from classroom events, share their thinking and collaboratively identify the significance of these ideas and experiences.

As a critical friend, I encourage teachers to articulate new ideas, and we discuss why they see value in certain views or ways of working and how they will position new thinking to become part of their pedagogy. Initially, it was an accepted expectation by all staff that I would lead teacher professional learning in relation to the multi domain units, yet in reality I have always believed that with appropriate support, teachers are more than capable – and willing – to lead their own learning; they decide how to develop as professionals and what they feel they need to pay attention to in their practice to enhance their students’ learning.

My intention has always been to ensure that teachers feel supported, trusted and encouraged to share and value their professional knowledge of practice. To enable
CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

them to consider their teaching experiences, and those of their colleagues, in different ways, I listen, and mirror back situations in ways which invite them to reconsider overlooked details. I invite them to discuss alternative approaches, explore a range of ideas, use this information to understand more about the principles and values which shape their practice and which ultimately determine the type of learning their students experience. Effectively my role is to enable teachers to examine their practice, value the professional knowledge they hold and use on a daily basis and use these insights to make decisions about the conditions they will create in their classrooms to support their students’ learning.

An important outcome of this work is that the teachers develop supportive relationships across teaching groups, and respectfully interrogate each other’s teaching practice in terms of agreed intentions for learning. As John Loughran further discusses in his chapter, a shared language has emerged which enables us to understand and share meaning within what is a complex and multi-faceted context of professional practice. We talk about such things as ‘linking ideas’, ‘keeping learning alive’ and we draw from the language which frames an agreed set of aspirational dispositions, developed by staff, which capture the learning intentions for every student’s primary education experience at St Joseph’s. These dispositions aim to focus teachers’ work on developing every student as a competent, independent critical thinker who sees and engages with learning as a life-long endeavour. This professional language has been socially constructed by the teachers and is now part of the lexicon of their professional practice.

THOUGHTFUL ATTENTION: NOTICING TEACHING

To undertake my role effectively, I am required to notice the degree to which each teacher demonstrates personal awareness and attention in thinking and learning. Encouraging teachers to explore their own assumptions (Brookfield, 1995) about their practice, plays a vital role in assisting teachers to develop new thinking and understandings about learning and teaching, while also enhancing their ability to demonstrate new understandings in contextually relevant ways (Smith, 2017). Such learning involves each teacher thoughtfully attending to the teaching approaches and processes they utilize each day so that these may become the objects of critical scrutiny (Elbaz, 1987; Jaworski, 1994; Mason, 1990; Schön, 1983, 1987). Such critical scrutiny requires teachers to develop an increasing sensitivity to notice the significant features of teaching itself, not only the subject discipline but also the significant features of learning and the choices made when working with learners (Mason, 1998). Reflective practice therefore becomes an essential part of such a mindful approach to teaching and professional learning.

As critical friend, it is my responsibility to create conditions which encourage teachers to engage in thoughtful attention. Finding effective ways to support teachers to openly confront and articulate the challenges or issues that arise in their teaching is essential. Only then is it likely that they will realise such issues and problems do
not reflect inadequacy or lack of success as a teacher but rather, as Dewey (1910) explained, that the act of recognising that teaching is often problematic is essentially the first step towards developing and enhancing teaching.

To recognize the problematic nature of teaching we continually draw on recent classroom events and use that information to shape future planning, using consistent and careful consideration in line with Dewey’s (1910) notion of reflective thought. We ‘notice’ and ‘mark’ (Mason, 2002) significant moments and critically reflect (Brookfield, 1995) on what is happening in such situations. Teachers consider their actions from different perspectives, (reframing as per Schön’s (1983) description of apprehending alternative perspectives) most importantly, the student experience.

As a trusted ‘friend’ I ask provocative questions, sometimes provide data to be examined through another lens, and above all continually reassure teachers that change takes time and that while they may be impatient to find ready or prescribed solutions to challenges in teaching, there is no silver bullet. I encourage them to remain open-minded and willing to accept a range of view-points. Active listening becomes essential, attending to all information and input including the spoken word and body language while maintaining concentration on the teacher and what matters to them, i.e., keeping the teacher as the focus of all conversations. Above all I work to continually develop my capacity to sort through the ‘noise’ of descriptive accounts of events and activities to identify and carefully unpack the underlying issues or critical concerns within each teacher’s experiences.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF TEACHING

Teaching by its very nature is problematic, it constantly presents a range of shifting dilemmas that demand attention. This continual decision making defines much of what makes teacher professional knowledge a discipline in itself (Loughran, 2009). These decisions require teachers to draw from relevant experience to make sense of the complex interrelatedness between the contextual demands of each teaching situation, student identity and each student’s entitlement to opportunities for rich, relevant and meaningful learning.

This challenging and difficult work is often reflected in the conversations we share in the multi domain dialogue sessions. Teachers talk about their successes, frustrations and often the many and ongoing challenges they face in their classroom teaching. Occasionally expectant pauses punctuate our conversations, perhaps reflecting teacher expectations that someone outside their teaching context should have some ready answers to solve such dilemmas. As critical friend, my contribution is to listen, question, acknowledge their concerns and prompt discussion, but such responses do not always sit comfortably with teachers who sometimes just want answers.

Sometimes expectations for a ‘quick fix’ are the result of previous professional development experiences where, as passive learners, teachers have become practised at listening to, and compliantly adopting, outlined approaches. Sometimes the need
for an answer is simply because teachers are just at their wits end, frustrated by continual challenges. Regardless my role is to remain focused on allowing and supporting teachers to sit comfortably with uncertainty.

There are no ‘one size fits all’ solutions, learning is nuanced and fluid and requires teaching to be flexible and responsive to individuals, situations and context. While often demanding and difficult, the most appropriate responses are developed by those closest to the situation, teachers themselves. Teachers know their students; they know the reality of their teaching context. At St Joseph’s, teachers work together to support each other and realise their capacity to attend to such dilemmas. Through this process of collaborative learning teachers achieve classroom change which they see as important, relevant and valuable for their learners.

THE VALUE OF EMERGING KNOWLEDGE

Multi domain dialogue sessions provide opportunities for teachers to engage in professional discussions that go beyond ‘finding solutions’. These discussions involve complex understandings about teaching and as teachers begin to see their thinking and experiences from alternative perspectives through talking openly about their ideas and challenges, many shared values and beliefs about learning and teaching begin to emerge. Many of the chapters in this book have been developed as a consequence of teachers paying attention to, and valuing, specific aspects of their practice which have significantly impacted their students’ learning in valuable ways.

Part of my role has been to capture such understandings so that we can examine and interrogate our thinking in order to better determine what we are learning about effective pedagogy. We have started to collaboratively construct an overview of the elements of quality learning and teaching, which the teachers at St Joseph’s value. These elements outline specific conditions required for quality learning to take place. While this is a work in progress, to date 12 conditions have been identified. These include conditions which:

1. promote trust and respect among teachers and students;
2. promote student voice and provide opportunities for students to take action with learning;
3. develop lines of student interest and effectively connect these to overall unit understandings;
4. attend to student thinking in ways which strengthen and personalise learning experiences;
5. create opportunities and time for deep learning;
6. value & build on student opinion & thinking;
7. effectively scaffold student skill development so that students can achieve successively more complex and sophisticated skill sets;
8. encourage students to become independent learners by giving them the authority, knowledge & opportunities to take ownership of their learning;
9. nurture each student’s personal and interpersonal skill development;
10. incorporate student voice in learning, including assessment;
11. identify a clear purpose for learning (teacher & student) – why do we need to know this; and,
12. Effectively develop critical thinking skills.

By enabling teachers to work with clear pedagogical purpose their teaching becomes much more focused on student learning. Staff have articulated a number of key pedagogical intentions that apply across all levels of teaching throughout the school. They frame purposeful pedagogy as that which:

- demonstrates to each student that they are valued members of a learning community & their ideas enable learning to occur;
- increases each student’s sense of ownership of personal learning;
- enables students to find ways of linking their ideas to those of others;
- ensures language and learning experiences make topics accessible & exciting for all students;
- builds on students’ existing experiences & uses this information to inform appropriate planning & teaching;
- sets manageable content boundaries to assist individual learning;
- values and attends to student ideas throughout a unit;
- provides time for students to organize their thinking;
- assists students to make meaningful connections between existing ideas and new information;
- provides structured opportunities for student reflection;
- generates a diverse range of views & uses these to stimulate student thinking & learning;
- encourages students to recognize new possibilities for thinking and acting beyond present thinking and experience;
- opens opportunities for wider sharing of ideas with authentic audiences;
- values diversity so that students can feel free to think about ideas from different perspectives; and,
- sets clear expectations and boundaries in terms of appropriate learning behaviours and protocols.

Since capturing this thinking, teachers have become much more astute at seeing how such intentions shape their practice and how they align with the conditions they seek to create to promote quality learning.

Teachers have started to notice the importance of describing teaching behaviour to ensure that their actions align with their focus on quality student learning. They also believe that what people see as they walk through their school should indicate that the focus of their work is on the student and the learning taking place. Therefore, their teaching should look and sound different to schools which focus on teaching rather than learning. Teachers have identified a range of teacher behaviours that
indicate for them, that they are attending to the learner. These behaviours include but are not limited to:

- actively listening to students and asking questions which encourage students to clarify &/or elaborate their thinking;
- using effective ‘wait time’ when responding to student contributions so that students have time to organise and express personal thinking;
- planning for and implementing adequate time for students to explore ideas and issues, e.g., extended time for discussion, ‘Think, pair, share’, etc.;
- providing positive verbal encouragement to students to contribute ideas;
- scribing exactly what students say & displaying these statements around the room;
- utilising a range of teaching modes such as videos, graphic organizers, etc.;
- utilising explicit teaching strategies which require students to prepare and share their thinking, e.g., ‘think, pair, share’, ‘post box’, graphic organisers, etc.;
- using contentious statements to be deliberately provocative in order to stimulate student thinking and promote a diversity of views;
- providing time and explicit activities which require students to reflect & revisit ideas/experiences/discussions, e.g., personal journals, video reviews, sound bites, photos, etc.;
- positively and respectfully challenging students’ expressed ideas and opinions by using language which invites students to clarify or elaborate on their ideas, e.g. ‘tell me more about that …’, etc.;
- utilising strategies which allow students to have ready access to all thinking statements captured throughout unit, e.g. continual displays in room or access to finding records on white board, sheets in personal journals, etc.;
- explicitly planning for reflection as a learning experience;
- asking open-ended questions;
- reducing the amount of teacher talk; and,
- actively listening to students to hear the meaning they are constructing; etc.

This information identifies teacher behaviour that aligns with a clear philosophy about the central importance of the learner in learning. These statements explicitly define what learning and teaching looks and sounds like in the classroom.

This process also enabled teachers to consider the learning behaviours they valued for students which led to the staff working together to develop a set of aspirational learning dispositions which frame the learning intentions for each student’s schooling. On completion of their primary school education the students at St Joseph’s will:

- have conviction to serve with dignity;
- be flexible and responsive to circumstances;
- be creative and critical thinkers;
- be effective and articulate communicators; and,
- be informed and active citizens.
Teachers know that effective conditions for learning frame teacher behaviour, purposeful teaching and valued student learning. Their knowledge about conditions for learning enables them to articulate the specific learning they value for their students, and this has been captured and developed further in a collaborative effort by all teachers in the school to identify a school vision for primary education. This process informs the aspirational whole school learning dispositions discussed by Andrea Dineen in her chapter. Figure 4.1 demonstrates the thinking that has enabled teachers to build specific connections between learning and teaching.

By using a shared language and capturing and drawing together shared understandings about quality learning and teaching, teachers not only value the learning they develop as a result of the multi domain dialogue sessions but also effectively communicate that knowledge to a wider audience in a variety of ways. In doing so they have come to see the place of their work and professional knowledge beyond their own classroom and school setting. The insights they continue to capture provides valuable information for all educators who strive to enhance student learning.
CONCLUSION

When the educational climate revolves around intense accountability, change in teacher practice, particularly sustained change, often becomes an indicator of effective and worthwhile teacher learning and development. Yet, as teacher learning is a complex phenomenon, focusing on behavioural objectives alone can reduce teaching to something which is technical and trivialises the complexity of teaching – ultimately trivialising teaching itself. The work that has been undertaken at St Joseph’s acknowledges that quality student learning is not achieved by simply changing teaching techniques. Instead teachers need to explore and understand the reasoning and critical thinking which informs and determines the types of changes they choose to make to their practice.

At St Joseph’s the professional knowledge that is entwined in teachers’ everyday decision making as they work to attend to their students’ learning needs is valued, supported and nurtured in ways which builds teacher confidence and expertise and leads to purposeful teaching.

Multi domain dialogue sessions require a high level of intellectual engagement from teachers and ongoing support from school leadership. As a critical friend, I have been privileged to work alongside and learn from the teachers themselves as they have openly and honestly shared with me their concerns, successes and insights about learning and teaching. Teaching is hard work but expert teachers embrace opportunities to learn more about their practice and this book bears testament to that fact.

When teachers are provided with conditions for learning which enable them to feel trusted, and which respond to their learning needs and interests, they quickly demonstrate the capacity to develop a high level of awareness about the nature of their professional practice, an understanding of the problematic nature of teaching and the important role they play as decision makers in the practice setting. These expert teachers value their students and value quality learning and as a result they continue to develop expert professional knowledge. We all have much to learn from what they know and how they enact that knowing in their practice.

NOTE

1 Domains are distinct bodies of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Science, History, Civics and Citizenship and The Humanities are examples of the different domains. Multi Domain means attending to more than one domain in a unit of work. Multi domain units work to provide learning experiences that enable students to link key ideas across curriculum areas.

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SECTION 2

ENHANCING LEARNING AND TEACHING
5. GETTING CONTENTIOUS IN FOUNDATION

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of disruption, where headlines, images and sound bites bombard our senses with uncertainty and change. From the food we eat to the power we use, at every turn even the mundane draws on our capacity to sit comfortably with uncertainty and somehow find ways to determine what matters; this is the norm of our everyday life. As teachers we need to address what this reality requires of us so that we can ensure our teaching provides students with the learning they need; learning opportunities that not only build their knowledge but their resilience, so they can be responsive and adaptable to change.

Thinking about these issues led us to consider how we could use the experience of uncertainty as a catalyst for quality learning. How could we create conditions in our classrooms that would provide opportunities for our students to develop the critical thinking, creativity, knowledge growth and sense of empowerment which their everyday world demands? Our reasoning began to shape a teaching strategy where contentious statements or provocations, that is statements that were likely to cause our students to disagree or feel confused, became useful frames for inquiry learning.

This chapter shares our story about how we changed our students’ learning and our classroom teaching. It is essentially a story about how we intentionally interrupted the steadiness of student thinking by valuing indecision, and how this fuelled our students’ desire to know and learn. Most importantly it is about how our students’ ideas and emotions became the currency of classroom interactions and how student engagement produced deep thinking that lead to rich learning (Elkader, 2014; Parsons, 2011).

By strategically using contentious statements to enhance learning, we effectively created a space where our students felt comfortable to explore possibilities, predict, question, discuss and play with the unknown.

BELINDA’S STORY: CONTENTIOUS STATEMENTS – CREATING A SHARED EXPERIENCE FOR LEARNING

I am an educator of children who are between five and six years of age, these children are in Foundation Level or the first year of primary schooling in Australia. I have always encouraged my students to inquire and ask questions, yet I often find it challenging to generate a rich and stimulating learning environment that caters
to the needs and capabilities of all my students. Recently I introduced contentious statements as a way of engaging and encouraging all my students to be active thinkers and talkers. This strategy seems to work particularly well with young children because it draws on their willingness to question and their capacity to think about situations in different ways.

I first learnt about the potential of contentious statements as a teaching strategy when I participated in a professional learning program that really changed my thinking about learning and teaching. The program was called Contemporary Approaches to Primary Science (CAPS) and my learning from this program enabled me, as a teacher, to experience success on both a personal and professional level. Through this program I began to recognize how fundamental my role as classroom teacher is in contemporary education, particularly my responsibility to provide opportunities for my students to experience meaningful learning. I realized that if children, even very young children, are to develop as global citizens in a fast and ever changing world, they need opportunities to engage in decision making and change and I need to help them obtain the skills they need to feel confident about dealing with uncertainty.

The CAPS professional learning program evoked a range of emotions. I experienced joy and satisfaction but the most significant feeling was confidence to express my views about quality education and a belief in my ability to support my students to develop deep learning.

As young global citizens, I believe children need to learn how to make informed choices and develop an awareness of their rights and responsibilities, both to themselves and others. It is my role as a teacher to ensure that students learn how to express their values and opinions and develop their own thoughts – while respecting and listening to the views of others. I began to feel excited and motivated to be a part of ‘the new’ and ‘the different’ and I was ready to try some of the ideas in my classroom.

While at CAPS in discussion with my teaching colleagues who were also attending the program, we decided to introduce contentious statements as a way of promoting skill development and rich learning in our classrooms. We worked to develop ways of using such statements as emotional hooks, engaging our students’ hearts and minds while supporting them to develop independent learning and deep thinking.

In time we found that using contentious statements in this way enabled a type of inquiry learning that may have otherwise been difficult to achieve. A requirement of our participation in CAPS was to produce a short video about our professional learning which showcased the teaching of science in a contemporary manner. After much discussion we decided to focus our story on the introduction of contentious statements in our classrooms because we felt this had deepened student learning by making learning more purposeful.

Contentious Statements: Engaging Hearts and Minds

One of the most memorable experiences that we conveyed in our personal learning story explained how we first introduced contentious statements with our students
to think about systems related to food production. We focused on egg farming, and designed a shared learning experience which invited students to experience a key idea, consider alternative perspectives and share their thinking. One afternoon, I took my class to the oval, where our junior and senior playgrounds were located. I divided the class into two groups, deliberately choosing a top-heavy number of strong personalities to remain in one group and I asked this group to move to the junior playground and stand together in a section that was enclosed by four railed walls; connected to these rails were tunnels. This was a restricted area, later referred to in egg farming terms as a caged environment. When this group had all moved into the restricted area, I told the other group of students they could go and play anywhere on the oval, this was later to be referred to as the free range environment:

You can run on the running track, play on the junior or senior playground, go down to the garden, it’s up to you. It’s your choice where you would like to play.

So off the second group ran, very excited to have this unexpected free play. Meanwhile, the students in the first group who were standing in the caged environment made moves to join their classmates, climbing through the rails and tunnels. “Oh no, you’re to stay there,” I instructed.

Initially they giggled and thought my behaviour was amusing but as I reiterated that they were to remain where they were, the majority of students became irate and annoyed. I had my i-pad with me to record their reactions, and there were many.

Why can’t we go and play?
This is really unfair Miss Jackson!

I didn’t reply to their protests because I wanted them to experience an emotional response; even if that was a strong feeling of injustice. I then called the other free range students to come back, and explained that we would be returning to the classroom. As we began to make our way back, the reactions became stronger. Some students were visibly upset and I was told in no uncertain terms how unfair I had been.

Look what you’ve done Miss Jackson.
You’ve been so unfair!

One of the children with a stronger personality even went on to add, “Well done, I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

This exercise had only lasted about 4 or 5 minutes, yet the impact on the children, was far greater than I had anticipated.

Once inside the classroom I began to work to facilitate a rich discussion designed to move my students beyond simply thinking about how unfair it was to be restricted while only half the class had the opportunity to play. It was at this stage that I introduced the concept of a contentious statement to the children.

As a class we said these words together and I then went on to explain the meaning and purpose of a contentious statement; words that were meant to challenge our thinking and encourage us to form an opinion. I gave prompts and examples about
what opinions might sound like and we talked until I felt the students had a clear understanding. I also wanted to make it clear that it was ok to have an opinion that was different to the teacher’s or even an opinion that was different to a friend’s.

I emphasized that it mattered that they were able to provide a reason that explained why they held their opinion. For children who are five and six years of age with innocent minds this may seem an exceptionally difficult exercise, however, I was of the view that if I was able to appropriately scaffold their thinking and support them to construct a shared understanding about what we were doing then it might be achievable.

What I learnt once again throughout this teaching process, was that young children should never be underestimated; they are keen learners who can understand and do amazing things.

I introduced the statement, ‘Caged eggs are the same as free range eggs’ and this framed our discussion. I asked the children if they knew of any differences between these two types of eggs. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that many of the children named some of these differences:

- The colour of the yolks are different.
- The free range chickens get to walk around on the farms wherever they want.
- My mum won’t buy caged eggs, because the chickens don’t get to move and have to stay in one place.

I then asked the children if they could see any connections between free range chickens, caged chickens and our experiences outside in the playground. Their answers were amazing and this was a moment in my teaching career that will stay with me forever. Just about every child in the class was able to make the connection and from this point, we talked about how our experiences in the playground influenced our thinking.

This shared experience had produced two different perspectives and I encouraged them to use the experience and the responses they had to form an opinion about the contentious statement. I explained that each person had to share a reason to explain their view and this would be an important part of our discussion.

The students provided independent thoughts, clearly articulating their ideas and opinions. They were excited to have a voice and share in a rich discussion with their peers.

After the whole group discussion, we returned to the playground and by reversing the previous roles, the children in the caged environment were given their opportunity to play freely. The level of emotion displayed by students indicated that this would be a powerful and extensive unit of teaching.

_Going Deeper_

The students became the driving force behind their own learning and the questions came in abundance; some more relevant than others but that was okay. For me, the
purpose of questions is not always to seek answers, but to explore and investigate. It is important to encourage students to enjoy the feeling of wonder and willingly undertake a journey of discovery. A popular question among the students was, “How can we find out if caged and free range eggs really are different?”

We talked about the importance of finding out more information about the two types of chickens as a way of learning more about the eggs they produced, but we started by looking at the eggs, noting that free range were larger than caged. One student then asked, “Why are they different sizes?” and from there we cooked the eggs and did a taste test.

Two thirds of the class decided that free-range eggs had more taste and flavour than caged eggs and one third liked the taste of caged eggs more than free range. We documented these results.

I was really pleased with what was happening. The students were able to form and express different opinions and points of view and provide reasons, to explain why they were thinking in certain ways:

Maybe their bodies are different and that makes the eggs different.
I like the taste of the free range eggs, because the chickens get to go where they want and that’s why they taste better.
I like the taste of the caged eggs because they have a different flavour.
I think the free range eggs taste better because of the way they were cooked.
It doesn’t really matter if you eat free range or caged eggs because they’re both just eggs and they taste the same.

From the eggs, we looked at the chickens and through age appropriate books and articles, videos and short documentaries, in particular programs such as ‘kids for kids’, we looked at the differences between caged and free range chickens.

The interest amongst the students was incredible and growing. Without any input from me they started researching at home in their own time, creating projects and bringing in newly discovered information to share with the class. The power of peer teaching in this context was quite remarkable. Through these incidental moments, some of the best teaching happened because I was supporting rather than directing their learning, and now every student in the class was actively involved and driving their own learning.

What became more apparent to me in this unit was the opportunity that resided in using media to develop student learning. Media could be used as a prompt to develop questioning skills and critical thinking and this was paramount in the formulation of independent thought. Albeit on a basic level, these Foundation students learnt to infer, test theories, sort, classify, compare and contrast information.

Students explored the ideas of ‘just’ and ‘unjust’; supporting their opinions with evidence. They discussed why it could be unjust to keep chickens in cages, never allowing them to roam freely in the fresh air. They spoke of free range chickens having freedom to walk wherever they wanted and the benefits associated with this
freedom. Connections were made and revisited through the contentious statement, ‘Caged eggs are the same as free range eggs.’

It was immediately obvious to me at this stage of the unit, that students were successfully acquiring the necessary skills to undertake an inquiry approach to their learning. It was so rewarding to see the engagement and enthusiasm and the deep learning that was taking place, which, in essence, had stemmed from shared learning experiences all linked directly to the contentious statement.

As we moved through the unit, I showed the students the video recording I had made on the first day in the playground. There was much laughter and discussion, as they watched themselves on the interactive white board – the big screen. They were surprised by the level of emotion they had displayed and continued to make further connections with the chickens:

I really do feel sorry for the caged chickens. It’s so unfair for them.
I wouldn’t like to be trapped in a cage. I wouldn’t be able to do anything.

This highlighted to me just how significant this emotional hook had been in relation to the learning in this unit.

Reflecting on the Learning and Teaching

I had high hopes for this unit and I was not disappointed. I was constantly ‘blown away’ by the capabilities of these Foundation students and their desire to learn. They had acquired so many skills that enabled them to drive and support their own learning.

I am now of the view that the effectiveness of using contentious statements as an approach to facilitating learning needs to be developed slowly because this teaching requires appropriately scaffolding and supporting student thinking. It is an approach that requires the teacher to be willing to stand back and allow students to exercise decision making so that they can take ownership of their learning – an essential condition for quality learning.

The use of contentious statements is an approach that enables skill development yet these skills must be explicitly taught and students need time to practice skills. I watched as my students became empowered when they were given the opportunity to explore their interests and ideas. While many of the initial questions varied in relevance to the topic, the inquiry process, enabled students to learn how to sort information and eliminate what was secondary and irrelevant to their questions.

Interestingly I had a number of parents approach me about the use of contentious statements. Comments were made about the apparent shift in education especially when considering what they had learnt at school and how their children were now learning.

I’ve learnt more from my six-year-old about caged eggs than I knew myself.
I am constantly being told multiple facts about caged eggs and free range eggs.
My six-year-old bellowed in the supermarket, “Mum don’t buy caged eggs!” they are so mean to the chickens!

Given that parents often comment that their young children don’t usually say much about what goes on at school (e.g., Parent: “What did you do at school today?”; Student: “I can’t remember”), the comments listed above demonstrate the genuine interest these children had in sharing their learning.

What my students learn in class depends largely on the experiences I provide and the opportunities I create for reflection and critical thinking. If I work to provide them with the skills they need to question and explore their world, their natural curiosity will prevail. When I do this thoughtfully the possibilities for learning are endless. When I use a contentious statement to encourage my students to question and explore answers, they build understanding.

Contentious statements require students to clarify their emotions and thoughts in a way that allows them to think independently of others. I am able to encourage them to weigh up different points of view and draw their own conclusions and this approach helps me to create the conditions to support quality learning in my classroom.

As a teacher, trying something new can be a risk, yet we are constantly telling our students to take risks with their learning. In this particular case, trying something new paid off. Using a contentious statement provided a rich context for learning and produced a shared learning experience that became the beginning of a rich inquiry unit.

This whole experience became even more valuable for me because of the opportunity to share this approach to teaching with a colleague who was new to the Foundation level. By working with someone who was also willing to take risks and try something new, we experienced the power of learning with, and from, one another. We bounced ideas around and supported each other and while things certainly didn’t always work out as expected, we worked with our students to share a learning journey that was constantly evolving.

KIRSTIN’S STORY: CONTENTIOUS STATEMENTS – A ROUTE TO RICH ASSESSMENT

I first came across the use of contentious statements when I was a new, international teacher working in my first school in Australia. At this school the inquiry approach to teaching science was being used and the teachers were also using contentious statements as a means of engaging students as well as a form of assessment at all levels, including Foundation (the first year of schooling—students are aged between 5 and 6 years).

I remember the teachers presenting an example during a staff meeting where they discussed the issue of caged versus free range eggs. According to the teachers, using a contentious statement had provided a way of assessing student ability to form an
opinion on a controversial subject and determine a student’s ability to use evidence to justify their position. It was an eye opener to observe students as young as five years of age formulating an opinion based on facts and evidence.

Flash forward to the following school year and I find myself working with Belinda at the Foundation level. We were at times frustrated by the challenge of trying to encourage students to be free thinkers while at the same time providing them with the basic knowledge and skills they needed to be able to explore, understand and express their ideas about a topic.

It was sometimes difficult to find ways to assess student thinking at this level; especially in the humanities and sciences because our students started school with varying literacy skills and as our assessment strategies relied heavily on reading and writing, this made it difficult for many children to share their knowledge. (One-on-one student interviews were usually effective but this often took a lot of time so these were often not practical to do on a regular basis.) We needed to find assessment strategies that enabled us to gather information from students in a range of ways. We also needed to gain information about various aspects of learning and development and the strategies we used needed to be effective, manageable and age appropriate.

Contentious Statements and Formative Assessment

The Victorian Curriculum, which guides teaching and learning in the state of Victoria (Australia), specifically addresses the need to attend to the development of students’ critical and creative thinking. The curriculum states:

By the end of Level 2, students use and give examples of different kinds of questions. Students generate ideas that are new to them and make choices after considering personal preferences. Students identify words that indicate components of a point of view. They use reasons and examples for different purposes. Students express and describe thinking activity. They practice some learning strategies. Students demonstrate and articulate some problem-solving approaches. (Victorian Curriculum Foundation to Year 10, 2016)

I began to wonder how contentious statements might be useful as a form of assessment in our junior classes. I thought that perhaps using such statements would enable us to gather information that aligned with a broader range of expected learning outcomes. So we began to use contentious statements to prompt discussion and develop critical thinking skills. In doing so, we found that contentious statements were useful for assessing student learning.

By using a contentious statement focused on a particular issue I find that I am able to facilitate interactive discussions which allow me to complete assessment in whole group and small group settings. I am able to gather information about how students are developing content knowledge, critical and creative thinking, ethics, communication skills, and also personal and interpersonal development. Working
in this way I ensure that assessment is embedded within and developed throughout a unit of study.

Assessing How Students Are Making Sense of Their Experiences

Contentious statements invite students to explore content in meaningful contexts while also developing skills to identify evidence to support their thinking. Sometimes this evidence is found in hands on learning experiences or from texts, videos and even outside sources. Using this input I can support my students to think critically about, and build informed reasoning to, explain their feelings and understandings about an issue.

In a recent unit we discussed the concept of sustainability in terms of sustaining personal health. We had explored different examples through various hands on activities, and whole class discussions. Students had opportunities to ask questions and do shared research to understand more about this subject. To assess learning, a contentious statement was given to a small group of students of mixed ability. The statement read, “It is ok to put lots of junk food in our bodies.” We wanted to see if students could explain whether or not they agreed or disagreed with this statement and effectively communicate their reasoning.

The students were also required to justify their thinking and use evidence from previous explicit teaching sessions and independent activities and link these to their ideas. As they were working we were also able to observe their capacity to work cooperatively with others in a group, taking turns to clearly present an idea in a small group setting and again in a whole class discussion. It was rewarding to see young children debate an issue that they could relate to and understand.

Assessing student thinking and learning in this way helped us to identify that each student’s level of comprehension and understanding was different and that it was important to provide effective support to ensure that each student was given the opportunity to experience success and continue to build skills in these areas (Brookfield, 2012).

We developed diagnostic assessment techniques that enabled us to determine the modes of instruction that would most effectively match student learning needs. For a unit on the topic Place we began locally with: “What do we know about places around us?”

We started in our Science Immersion Room and from there we learnt about places around the school. We explored questions such as: “What do we know about these places?”; “What questions do we have?”; “What can we observe?” We became immersed in the outside environment – the garden, the orchard, the trees. We made observations about how students were communicating what they were seeing, feeling and how they discussed what they knew.

We had many great discussions and the students generated many questions. This information provided insights into each student’s capacity to deal with information and experience. We found a range of texts to provide students with the facts they
needed and we read appropriate books and watched video clips; and again we had
great discussions.

At this point in the unit we felt that some sort of mid-point assessment would be
beneficial. We decided that a contentious statement would be a great avenue to see
how the students could draw on factual information and their emotional responses
to formulate an opinion.

We decided to co-teach a session using a contentious statement because we felt
that having two teachers involved in the activity would allow for one teacher to lead
the discussion while the other could record student responses for use as a mid-term
assessment.

We invited student opinion about the statement, “Trees are not important.”
We stressed that there was no right or wrong answer but that it was important to
express an opinion that was clearly supported by a reason. We then allowed students
to formulate their opinions and share their reasoning in a group discussion. Each
response was recorded in a chart under: ‘Agree’ or ‘Disagree’.

We recorded student responses for further reference as part of our ongoing
assessment data. As the discussion continued we realized that all students were
disagreeing with the statement, i.e., they deemed trees to be important. We found
that students were not only supporting their opinions with clearly stated reasons but
they often built on their classmates’ responses:

Trees are important, they give you oxygen.
Trees are important; they give us shade when it’s summer in Melbourne.
If we didn’t have trees we wouldn’t have wood and we wouldn’t have houses.

We then decided to play devil’s advocate to see if a teacher’s opinion would sway
students to change or modify their thinking. We said, “Trees are not important they
take up too much space.”

Ultimately we were looking for depth in student thinking and the ability to
see both sides of a provocation. As previously noted, scaffolding student thought
is an essential skill in preparing students to be able to formulate an opinion with
evidence. Signs of success at Foundation level were a passionate response and clear
articulation, such responses included:

Trees are not important; the leaves make a mess and cause extra work.
Trees are not important they can be dangerous – once my brother ran into a tree.

At the end of the discussion we reviewed responses and gave students a chance to
offer any final thoughts. We made sure that everyone who wanted to take part was
able to do so but we didn’t pressure all students to share in this session.

We were able to see that students were beginning to feel comfortable with
formulating ideas and developing an opinion about a given topic. We were able to take
notes to use for further instruction as well as assessment purposes. We were also able
to give students the confidence to trust in their own voice and participate in a whole
group discussion; taking turns and responding to other students and teacher prompts.
Contentious Statements & Summative Assessment

In the same unit on the topic of Place we decided to do an end of unit assessment using contentious statements in a small group setting. We found that contentious statements were also beneficial further into a unit and suited a small group setting where the teacher could sit with students, provide prompts when needed, and record notes for assessment.

The unit on Place was our second unit of study in the school year, so many of the Foundation year students were still learning how to work cooperatively in a group, developing skills such as sharing time by taking turns to speak and listen.

I have come to see that when creating contentious statements it is important to use a language that is familiar and easily accessible to the range of students in the classroom. At the Foundation level the statements have to be easily understood and something that students can make a connection to then formulate their opinion. It is also important to be able to tap into their emotions and create that affective hook. Sometimes the most lengthy and difficult part of the process is determining their personal understanding and readiness to engage in dialogue with their peers (Brookfield, 2012). We decided to create four contentious statements for our end of unit assessment:

Places never change.
It doesn’t matter if I throw rubbish on the ground.
Vegetables are bad.
It’s ok to be nice to some people and not others.

We grouped students from two Foundation classes into mixed ability groups with between four to six children in each group ensuring that each group had a good mix of personalities to encourage an effective debate. Each group was given a statement that they discussed as a group and then formed individual and/or group opinions to present to the class. We gave students paper on which to record responses and a teacher circulated around to each group after students had initial discussion about the statement.

As students discussed their statements in their groups a teacher went around and prompted and listened to each group. At this time the teacher assessed how students were working and communicating with each other as well as how students were able to formulate and support their opinions.

As we met with each group we made sure to engage each student and listen to their opinion and reasoning. We also observed how students interacted with their peers and how engaged they appeared to be with the activity. It was noisy, but as we went around it was clear that students were taking turns and supporting their responses with reasons. Once we had visited each group students were called back together as a large group to discuss their responses. As students presented to the class we assessed their speaking and listening skills and various degrees of verbal and non-verbal communication. By using contentious statements to frame this assessment
we were able to learn more about the students and how they were thinking and processing information.

Using contentious statements as summative assessment required more of students than just memorizing facts from a unit of study. They needed to be able to form an opinion and engage in rich and meaningful dialogue with other students and teachers. We were able to identify students who were taking leadership roles and those who were guiding discussions in small groups. We could see the groups that struggled and the students who found it challenging to work cooperatively in a group. We were able to observe and gather data about students who had interesting ways of supporting and justifying their responses and students who struggled to form any sort of opinion.

CONCLUSION

Our stories in this chapter were designed to convey how contentious statements have changed not only our teaching, but also (and perhaps more importantly) our students’ learning. When student thinking is deliberately interrupted by the confusion that a contentious statement can present, students are placed in a position whereby they learn to value uncertainty and use it as an opportunity to consider a range of ideas questions.

We see that our students are engaged in learning because we use these statements to allow them to share what they think and what they believe. We have found better ways to assess their development so that we are able to gain a more accurate picture about their overall development and not just their capacity for reading and writing.

As teachers we need to constantly re-evaluate things we do in the classroom to allow our students to develop the skills they need in their everyday life. Intentionally interrupting the steadiness of student thinking with contentious statements provides a strategy where uncertainty empowers our students to want to know and learn.

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Kristin Baynton
Foundation teacher

Belinda Jackson
Foundation teacher
Have you ever heard someone say, “I immersed myself in a hot bath to clear my mind” or, “I immersed myself in a good book to escape the worries of my world?” Have you wondered how babies learn to speak or how you would go about learning a foreign language? It’s not hard to imagine what it means to immerse yourself in a community, in so doing, you’re halfway there! By surrounding yourself with locals, you learn to feel safe and take risks. If someone laughs at you, you simply laugh back. In acting that way, we talk about it as being immersed, but what does it actually mean; and what does it mean when we talk about immersion in a classroom?

In this chapter, we think about immersion in terms of creating a presence – a time when learners feel as though they are really there, when they can open their minds to new possibilities and ways of thinking. A space in which they can make connections and ask questions. Where they are engaged, safe, risk takers. Where they are making sense of learning in the context of a new experience that is happening now! A valuable first step to the acquisition and discovery of meaningful learning.

In our teaching, we have come to see immersion as a process crucial to providing opportunities and experiences that provoke student interest and curiosity. As a condition of learning it gives students time to focus their thinking around what interests and matters to them. Immersion involves a variety of rich learning experiences in which students become engrossed. It’s a valuable process that gives us time to observe and ‘really listen’ to what our students already know and the skills they possess, in order to adjust the curriculum and shape the coming unit so that it encourages our students to wonder and question.

Our view of immersion motivates, challenges and encourages us to move beyond what can sometimes be the rhetoric of inquiry based learning. A teacher needs
to continue to develop and use diagnostic data on student learning but must also be flexible and open to possibilities, to be confident and capable of adjusting the curriculum in order to meet students’ needs and interests. We see those challenges as an exciting part of our planning process. Thinking about immersion in that way creates opportunities for us to find new and exciting pathways for our students to learn, to research and source ideas, to create a diverse array of pedagogic possibilities. It also means paying careful attention to our students’ changing world, making links and connections to current issues and events while always encouraging them to question; to seek to ask why. Through this conceptualization of immersion, we feel as though we bring to life our own passion as teachers and, as a consequence, we see the evidence of inspired learning within our classrooms.

IMMERSION IN PRACTICE

All the year 5 & 6 students watched a video together, The Plastic Ocean (Catalyst, 2012), as part of an immersion activity around ‘Systems’ the concept we were exploring. At the end of our session, Jack (one of the Year 6 boys) shouted out, “I need to take my think pad home tonight to show my Mum because I want to share with her my ideas for research. Plus I don’t want to forget how strongly I feel about this. It’s not up to me to just wait for someone else to do it, is it? It’s my choices now affecting our future!” (See Figure 6.1 for ThinkPad immersion activity.) For Jack, Immersion typically catalyses his learning, as the following quotes demonstrate:

To put this moment into context, Jack is a thinker and through immersion his curiosity always come to the fore in the class and he takes us in different learning directions. (Elisha, Year 6 classroom teacher)

I really value student directed learning that comes from immersion activities. With a child like Jack it ensures engagement and encourages him to think more deeply about his learning. (Jack’s mother)

At St Joseph’s the Leadership Team values the rich and critical teacher dialogue that occurs at the beginning and end of each term concept (e.g., Systems as per Jack’s example above). Each planning team is given time at the beginning and end of each unit to sit and think about the topics as they plan and review. Importantly, it has been a significant shift in our whole school planning practice over the past five years. That has produced deep discussions about the pedagogical potential and challenges associated with various concepts.

The Leadership Team sees the teacher as the most valuable and influential resource in the classroom and the dialogue process facilitates the opportunity for us to continue to build our capacity as teachers. Kathy Smith has been our critical friend and has created an environment in which she prompts, listens, challenges, encourages and develops our thinking, opinions and reasoning about a topic. One aspect of our approach is to bring students’ “pre thinking about a topic” to the discussion and we use these to analyse and develop our own understandings and potential for engaging our students.
**Figure 6.1. Think pad: Immersion**

Immersion happens across our three classes at the beginning of our unit and after our initial teacher planning session [with Kathy]. This gives us time to immerse ourselves in a professional conversation with our colleagues and to listen to each other’s perspectives and insights. Our own preconceptions are challenged and as a team we negotiate and formulate key understandings together. This shared understanding, hatching of key understandings, ignites in us the ability to lead laterally and creatively as each teacher seeks specific stimuli to present to all the students at that year level. The benefit is terrific for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Immersion experience</th>
<th>Big Ideas, key words, facts or connections</th>
<th>Questions or wonderings</th>
<th>Opportunities for action or research. What can I do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plastic Oceans <a href="http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/3583576.htm">http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/3583576.htm</a></td>
<td>Throw away World Ocean hangs onto plastic treasure for decades Consumers = a taste of plastic This makes me sick to the stomach too 175 pieces of plastic found in the bird’s stomach DISGUSTING</td>
<td>How can this be happening? Why didn’t I know about this before? I wonder if my Mum knows we are actually eating plastic when we eat seafood? What is a throw away world? Has it always existed?</td>
<td>I need to take action today and not wait for someone else. This is my future, my problem but also my choice. How can I reverse the throw away world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Pacific Garbage Patch</td>
<td>Twice the size of France Toxic Legacy Only humans make this waste that nature can’t decompose Life Elements Fundamental Gyre</td>
<td>Will it stop before it reaches the mainland? How can this devastating collection of rubbish that is twice the size of France not be on everyone’s mind? Does it mean because it can’t be seen we don’t have to deal with it? How can we make it more visible for people to see this disgust and destruction? Only humans make this waste that nature can’t decompose. That’s me! How can I change this for me and other people?</td>
<td>What can I do? Where can I find more information? I am contributing to this too. I’m a consumer of these products and I don’t feel right about that. Who knows about this and what is being done about it? What is the Government’s responsibility to this? What will happen is nothing changes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the students as they experience immersion from three distinct content foci but all linking back to the same key understandings! My students always return to my class excited, enthusiastic and with a thirst for wanting to know more! (Suzette, Year 4 Teacher)

IMMERSION IN A MULTI DOMAIN CURRICULUM

Through a broad concept we look at incorporating as many curriculum areas and domains as we can; thus the breadth of the concept allows for understanding across the many domains to be achieved across all levels of the school. (Gilbert, Principal)

Teaching is complex and demanding work that requires highly specialised skills and knowledge to impact significantly on student learning. Improving the learning outcomes of all students regardless of their socioeconomic background or geographic location is a challenge all teachers face daily. One of our biggest challenges is working out how to deliver the curriculum effectively. At St Joseph’s we have broad whole school concepts and shared ‘through lines’ (see Table 6.1) that guide our inquiry learning across all levels and domains. The Through Lines were established as a main idea that runs through all Multi Domain units across the school. They act as an umbrella statement to focus teachers on the concepts. The concepts are diverse and promote opportunities for purposeful immersion experiences in accord with the School’s Teaching and Learning framework:

At St Joseph’s we believe that the Victorian Learning Standards (VELS) will provide our students with ‘opportunities to manage themselves as individuals and in relation to others, understand their world in which they live and to act effectively in that world’ (VCAA ‘Introducing the Victorian Essential Standards’). Thus the three core interrelated strands need to be implemented jointly, not in isolation. We refer to this as a multi-domain approach. (St Joseph’s Staff Handbook 2016: Learning and Teaching)

A brief overview of the Multi Domain concepts is offered in Table 6.1 which shows how the major concepts are introduced in a biennial fashion and the model of implementation that allow us to explore ways of addressing curricular challenges. Through the application of a Multi Domain curriculum model, immersion activities take on extra meaning as they encourage teachers to be more open minded and creative in working with the concepts and to have the freedom to weave knowledge, reasoning and understandings across all domains through effective links to the curriculum; something that teachers recognize, value and appreciate.

In my classroom immersion stimulates and excites students. It is used to inform further student learning and offers children the opportunity to collaborate, cooperate and question with respect. (Susan, Year 5 Classroom Teacher)
In my classroom immersion activities provide opportunities to explore aspects of learning within a whole school concept and touch on elements that hook and inspire students. The activities promote a variety of approaches to any one concept in a short exploratory session. (Rhona, Year 4 Classroom Teacher)

Table 6.1. St Joseph’s multi domain overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Odd Year</th>
<th>Term 1</th>
<th>Term 2</th>
<th>Term 3</th>
<th>Term 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity and Diversity</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through Lines
- There are different perspectives and talents we bring to make a difference to our community at both a local and global level.
- Change is part of our lives and it impacts on the way we live.
- We have responsibilities to take action to sustain a harmonious balance in the world.
- The decisions that we make will impact on our quality of life and that of those around us.

Even Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Even Year</th>
<th>Term 1</th>
<th>Term 2</th>
<th>Term 3</th>
<th>Term 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Place</td>
<td>Systems/structures</td>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through Lines
- Every person has roles and responsibilities within the community and can make a difference.
- We all have a place in Australia and Australia has a place in the world.
- There are ‘laws’ systems and cycles that govern the way the physical and natural environment works.
- There are many things that we can do to look after our wellbeing.

Multi Domain supports immersion and helps us to get involved in the experiences we offer our students. The more diverse those experiences, the more excited we get at the possibilities of new connections to our students’ individual interests, questions and learning styles. Just as Rhona and Susan have highlighted (above), immersion activities have kept both students and teachers enthusiastic as they work together through relevant and meaningful learning experiences.

PLANNING IMMERSION ACTIVITIES

Whilst immersion activities can create and promote a range of learning opportunities for students around a broad concept, immersion can also generate challenges. We have found it important to keep a strong focus on the curriculum and especially on students’ prior knowledge in relation to that curriculum, a focus that teachers generally recognize and keep to the forefront in their planning.
Children can’t be expected to stand on the bank of a river, look at the water and make purposeful connections and questions without any idea of what they are looking at! … [Therefore] I plan purposeful immersion activities that give me information about what my students already know as well as information about the gaps in their understandings. (Julie, Year 2 Teacher)

The teacher and the activities are like a partnership. Students should be able to approach the immersion activities so that learning can happen both explicitly and implicitly. Students who have little or no prior knowledge in the broad concept cannot be expected to choose an area of interest for further learning if they have no connection, insight or idea as to what is available. Therefore, professional and strategic conversation in the beginning stages of planning is crucial. That means the teacher is at the centre of the process looking for opportunities to build an awareness of the concept. To do that requires clarifying and internalising their own ideas and thinking in order to establish clear, deliberate and explicit links to the curriculum. In this stage of planning teachers will not necessarily walk away with what they want the children to know and experience, but rather have developed an opportunity for personal clarification and professional learning around the concept.

This is a condition for teacher learning that encourages and prompts a discussion around teaching behaviours, opinions and understandings around the actual teaching and learning that will follow. Teachers become learners, they place themselves in the position that students experience every day. Just as we expect our students to take risks, be open minded and think divergently, so too we need to be doing that ourselves. By knowing ourselves as learners we too can take care to provide a safe learning environment for our students. As we have experienced many times, often, when planning immersion activities, the most authentic results come about when we work in teams sharing our ideas for input across a year level, rather than in just our own classroom.

Immersion activities expose students to information and ideas via different teaching styles. It allows them to think about the topic more laterally and build connections later on in their learning … Creativity, flexibility, knowledge of the topic, excitement & interest. I love immersion, different groups have different ‘vibes’ & feed off each other’s ideas in different ways, so even though you are teaching the same lesson multiple times, you really never know which direction the students will run with it. They also teach me to think in different ways by thinking of things I would not have otherwise thought about so my questions and observations change too, during the lesson, and later in other lessons. (Ailin, Year 3 teacher)

Planning Immersion activities gets teachers thinking, questioning, brainstorming and collaborating on ideas about the content and the possible ways of engaging students in their learning. (Victoria, Year 3 Teacher)
CAPTURING PRE THINKING IN IMMERSION

Our experience has shown immersion is made most purposeful at the beginning of a unit of work. This gives the students critical time to think, respond and wonder and acts as a springboard for refined wonderings, research, student voice and deeper thinking and questioning. Students (like us) don’t know what they don’t know, and immersion challenges student thinking while opening up new possibilities of learning and interest. This is a really valuable means to gaining observational data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Evidence from paragraph</th>
<th>Main Idea</th>
<th>Explanation: My thinking and connections</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.2. Samples of thinking tools used in immersion
and insight into students’ prior knowledge which can be used to continually inform the learning journey.

Using tools such as brainstorming, lotus diagrams, padlets and graphic organisers (see Figure 6.2) are perfect for capturing students’ pre-thinking and original ideas within immersion. For example, when beginning a unit on Systems students can be introduced to the topic by simply recording on a blank canvas the word Systems, then be invited to fill the page with their shared key words, phrases, statements and connections. All their thinking (on the page and spoken out loud) can then be recorded to demonstrate that it is valued. The list of ideas can then be displayed and revisited during the term allowing students to continually clarify, evaluate and refine the ‘pre-thinking and ideas’, and begin to recognise and respond to misconceptions without embarrassment or disappointment. Such a process can become an important learning activity in its own right through which development of knowledge becomes the key learning outcome for all – being able to see that occur can be a great learning reward.

WHERE CAN IMMERSION BE SEEN?

Striving for high levels of engagement in learning is what teachers work hard at on a daily basis. We are constantly searching for, and creating, new ways of thinking and questioning, pushing to be innovative, promoting action and stimulating student voice. When creating immersion activities we experience a role of parallel learning (teachers and students learning side by side); something that requires confidence with the uncertainty of being responsive to that which emerges. For some teachers, that can initially be an issue, but we believe it is something to encourage and embrace in order to build our pedagogical expertise and enhance our students’ learning.

In a recent case a young graduate recounted her experience with her Grade 1/2 class and her intention to study mini-beasts. Her immersion activity was a playground walk with shovels and containers to discover the mini beasts in their playground. Very few mini beasts were discovered but an unusual rock brought the class to a standstill. No matter how hard she tried to get the students interested in mini beasts, the rocks and suspected gold and crystals kept coming in from home. The students listened intently to each other and researched rocks. She finally gave up and the unit on mini beasts was shelved.

For some, the young graduate’s experience (above) could be seen as a failure. For others, it was an opportunity begging to be grasped. Despite all the planning, it is the case that immersion activities can arise in unexpected ways. But, they are unlikely to be pedagogically powerful if safe conditions for learning are not established. Teachers need to actively facilitate flexible, deliberate and purposeful student voice. In so doing, authentic learning in community unfolds. Immersion requires thoughtfully providing an environment for real life learning.
The acceptance of the need for doing, sharing and being; the need to seek to ‘tap into’ students’ need to know, can sometimes arise in the most unexpected way. For example, a few years ago we used a short clip to introduce our students to World Toilet Day (http://www.worldtoiletday.info/about) as an immersion activity for the concept Systems. We started with:

*World Toilet Day is a day to take action. It is a day to raise awareness about all people who do not have access to a toilet – despite the human right to water and sanitation. It is a day to do something about it.*

*Of the world’s seven billion people, 2.4 billion people do not have improved sanitation. 1 billion people still defecate in the open. Poor sanitation increases the risk of disease and malnutrition, especially for women and children.*

*We cannot accept this situation. Sanitation is a global development priority. This is why in 2013 the United Nations General Assembly officially designated November 19 as World Toilet Day. World Toilet Day is coordinated by UN-Water in collaboration with governments and relevant stakeholders.*

Vincent, a new student in a Grade 6 class shared his personal story and it led to so much more than we could ever have imagined from a unit.

In my first few weeks as a new student at St Joseph’s I will never forget hearing the words World Toilet Day. As I continued to learn more about these words it made me think about the people back at my home in Indonesia. I had spent time talking with my Grandpa about the big gap between the rich and the poor in our country and how the poor who do not have a toilet have no other choice but to go to the small local river or gutter and use it as a toilet. I decided I wanted to share my story with my peers, even though I was new I trusted them and I wanted them to know more about me. I also wanted them to notice that there are lots of people not as lucky as them and it’s important for them to be grateful for what they have. My teacher and friends were so interested in my story and it made me realise how important it is to learn from each other’s life experiences. I will never forget this. (Vincent, Grade 6 Student)

The class unanimously decided to pursue an inquiry into poor sanitation in neighbouring countries. They researched, compared and contrasted sewerage systems. The unit came to life, firstly within our class and then within the school community. The children created a campaign to raise awareness about World Toilet Day and took action to raise funds to supply three toilet blocks for a village in Indonesia. This became a powerful and purposeful immersion activity that turned into an amazing inquiry with meaningful action and engaged learning. Children from this class still talk about the experience now three years later. Stories similar to this can be recounted in many classrooms around the world. For many teachers we could respond with ‘thank you Vincent for sharing …’ but it was the decision of the teacher to use this story as a perfect pathway for
continued purposeful research and learning that was the catalyst for such a valuable experience.

**Installing a Science Immersion Centre**

The Leadership Team at St Joseph's foresaw the value of immersion and engaged Mary (first author) as a Science mentor to create a contemporary learning space that provided stimulating and student friendly immersion displays and experiences for each new concept.

The space was designed to provide teachers and students with ‘out of the square’ thinking and opportunities to lead discussions, ask questions, research and promote a partnership in student learning between student, teacher and science mentor. The resources compiled each term are designed to assist teachers and students in broadening their thinking, developing science skills and scientific literacies and invite individuals and/or small groups to pursue inquiries with a small library of factual texts.

There is no question the Science Immersion Centre is a valuable asset to the school. The children are provided with opportunities to extend their thinking about a concept or explore it in ways they may have not considered. The high interest level, and hands on nature of the activities ensures visiting the Centre is an exciting and worthwhile experience. (Grade 1 Classroom Teacher)

**IDENTIFYING EXPERTS IN YOUR OWN SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

There are a wealth of experts in school communities. At St Joseph’s we are always trying to make relevant connections within our community to the concepts in our two year Multi Domain cycle in order to enhance our immersion activities.

In discussion with a past parent, their unique family business of working in water treatment arose. They agreed to speak to the year six class about the innovative way the family company had developed a system to use algae to clean waste water from a range of industries. What was a simple personal conversation became an extraordinary opportunity for an immersion activity for the class looking at systems (and again, highlighting the freedom created through the Multi Domain approach we use that opens up the curriculum for authentic learning).

Coming in as a visiting speaker was an excellent process to share with the 5/6 students from St Joseph’s Hawthorn, our innovative system. The students were able to look at, feel and smell algae in various forms and watch a short video of our system in action. (Linda, Parent)

This presentation led into an inquiry by many students across the level who began to research other valuable uses for algae. Inquiry that was initiated by questions at Linda’s presentation such as:
“What makes the algae you grow different?”
“Is there an algae that will grow in the ocean that would clean plastic waste?”
“How can your algae be used in third world countries to clean out water borne diseases?”
“What impact does algae have on other plants in the food chain?”

Sometimes things just tie together nicely. We were invited by our local politician to participate in the formal event for Keep Australia Beautiful Week. Our students were able to view the successful installation of a new litter trap on the Yarra River as part of the cleaning up the Yarra election commitment funded through the Australian Government’s National Land Care Program (www.nrm.gov.au/national-landcare-programme). The event enriched the immersion activity (see for example, Lotus Diagram in Figure 6.3) started through Linda’s presentation and wonderful student initiated class activities around water quality, river and ocean systems followed.

**Figure 6.3. Lotus diagram used to capture students’ thinking**

**IMMERSION USING CURRENT ISSUES**

There are very few concepts or areas of learning that do not benefit from thoughtful use of Youtube clips, TEDTalks, BTN (see Behind The News, see for example, the Bionic Boy) and factual sites that provide colourful and engaging insights for students. Recently, we showed a short film about the decrease in the bee population
and the affect this would have on our food supply (see, TEDTalks, A plea for bees). It was an immersion activity for the concept Change for Grade 4. A parent later feedback to us that when they had a hive of bees on their chimney their Grade 4 student begged the exterminator to simply move the bees rather than destroy the hive. Her daughter was able to explain that plants depend on bees and the ways we can contribute to responding to the dilemma. A small group of students went on to further investigate this issue for their line of inquiry.

Our experience suggests that it is not difficult to locate issues in the daily newspapers that interest students and help them to become more attuned to things that are happening in their world – the world that they will influence in time. Whether the articles be about the pollution of our rivers, the inability of a newborn elephant to stand because of an incorrectly developed foot, the drought, or the work of doctors, students easily become immersed in articles that concern them and the future of their environment. We just need to entice them to ask questions and seek answers. They will take action with purpose.

IMMERSION THROUGH RICH LITERATURE AND ANIMATION

Literature is another powerful and effective way for children to find out, make connections and ask questions about their world. We have intentionally created a variety of interesting, inviting, engaging and (at times) challenging literacy rich environments in the immersion stage to promote so many successful discussions. These have often left our students with more questions than answers and a real motivation and wanting to know more. We regularly use animation (for example The Croods, Up and Wall-E, which feature strong themes and quotes that the teacher can use to prompt thinking and questioning around the concept) as an initial tool for storytelling to engage the students and offer them opportunities for further exploration across all the domains. We work hard to immerse students in literacy experiences that promote discussion which leads to students wanting to know more.

We work to create a learning culture where children will recognize that we don’t have the answers to everything and that they have questions that are different to (and even better than) ours. So when planning immersion activities we spend time paying careful and deliberate attention to our text selection around the concept. Texts and animation can be so powerful in making authentic connections to learning about their world, and can inspire their thinking while opening their eyes to new knowledge and possibilities. Doing so is a different text responsibility to gathering information in order to find answers or when we have sourced information texts about a concept or topic. Recognizing this pedagogical difference in texts is important to us in shaping our teaching and our students’ learning.

We have used The Rabbits (Marsden & Tan, 2000) and The Burnt Stick (Hill & Sofilas, 1996) in the immersion stage to inspire inquiry learning around the concept ‘Place’ – we all have a place in Australia and Australia has a place in the world. These amazing books created rich questions and connections that framed a variety
of learning opportunities across all the domains. The learning that followed these books (illustrations being important text too) has seen our children confront their own thinking, behaviours and opinions in student directed ways based around their own learning styles. Selecting texts and animations plays an important part in our planning and is an aspect of a teacher’s expertise that is often too easily overlooked. Judicious choice of literature is important as, when well aligned to learning intents, it encourages thinking outside the box that supports purposeful teaching and creates excitement and enthusiasm with our students.

The Rabbits by Shaun Tan was a great start to get our students thinking about the concept Place – Everyone has a place in Australia and Australia has a place in the world. The language and illustrations provided so many conversations and got us (the teachers) thinking about how we could create more powerful and effective questions for our students to guide their thinking and promote more questions. This book stimulated and created many learning pathways. The children generated questions they really cared about and internalised the need to know all about these historical events and why it’s important they have an opinion on it! They went on to explore the impact of migration and colonization in Australia both historically and currently from many perspectives through various book studies set in a Bloom’s Framework. It was an engaging and exciting unit that saw students’ inquiry learning stretch and weave across so many domains of the curriculum! (Grade 6, classroom teacher)

Another example was through the use of *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) which offered a starting point for immersion as the following vignette illustrates.

The Giving Tree: As Foundation classes sat wide eyed and with expectant looks on their faces they developed an interest in trees that you would have expected. The teacher followed up the story with photos of trees in our playground with students identifying each.

“I know where that tree is, I play near it.”

“There is an ant nest near that tree.”

Suddenly in our topic of PLACE students who had only been at school for a few months could identify with and feel the belonging of places. They would later take the magnifying glasses into the playground and discover the different coverings, leaves and flowers of the trees in their playground. They were observing parts of the school they had not noted before. The Giving Tree was a starting place for a powerful learning experience …

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

When planning immersion activities the teacher’s role is paramount. It takes time, a different way of thinking and looking at learning opportunities and an awareness of what’s possible. We can give our students endless stimuli but if we don’t ask the
right questions and if we don’t scaffold and model how we want our students to connect and respond using particular thinking tools and graphic organisers than we can miss opportunities to contextualise and maximise their learning.

When planning immersion activities I am constantly thinking! I consider the students’ interests, pre-thinking, wonderings, learning and curriculum gaps and concepts. It’s NOT just about engaging the students and making it fun! It’s about making real and deliberate decisions to spark interest with well researched activities within the context of the curriculum demands. It is my decision to listen to student thinking and respond with the right questions to construct the pathways of learning. (Grade 6, classroom teacher)

CONCLUSION

Immersion has, and will continue to, play an important role in the planning of our teaching because our experience has illustrated that regardless of learning styles, students engage purposefully in lines of inquiry that lead to authentic and meaningful action. Immersion is also important for our learning too; learning from colleagues and students. Immersion supports co-learning which is so crucial to encouraging students to engage in learning, not just complete tasks and absorb information.

Through our team based planning of immersion activities we have begun to challenge the notion of teaching as an isolated profession (Flinders, 1988; Lortie, 1975) and of the teacher as an individual; someone supposedly having all the answers and controlling all of the learning in their classroom. Immersion promotes strong and safe relationships for relevant and engaged learning, it is one of the conditions essential to making teaching and learning public. Our experience highlights that immersion is an opportunity for us to be innovative, creative, promote student voice and connect authentically to students to continue to build the power of effective teaching and learning for all (see Appendix for examples).

Working together to write this chapter has helped us clarify and articulate what we actually mean by immersion and why we believe it matters; it is part of the knowledge and expertise crucial to being a teacher. Collaborating on this chapter has reminded us of the crucial nature of really watching and listening to student learning and engagement. It has seen us become more explicit in our practice with immersion activities so that our students also have a clear understanding of the purpose and intentions of the learning. It has highlighted how important planning is, especially together, and to always have a clear understanding of that which we want our students to learn. The purpose of an immersion activity is to flexibly, willingly and effectively construct learning pathways for learning embedded in, and arising from, students’ interests, ideas, questions, queries, wonders, curiosity and experience.

As we stated at the outset of this chapter, teaching is highly complex and sophisticated business (Loughran, 2015). We trust that this chapter has offered some insight into the nature of that business and how, through our explanation of
immersion, better understandings of teachers’ professional knowledge of practice might emerge, and as a consequence that teachers and teaching become more highly valued.

APPENDIX 1. STUDENTS’ REACTIONS TO IMMERSION

REFERENCES


*Mary Howard*
*Science leader*

*Elisha Elliott*
*Grade 6 teacher*
Suzette Quinn

7. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The Hook

Quality learning requires learner consent.

(Loughran & Northfield, 1996, p. 124)

As a teacher I am constantly reminded of the importance and power of engagement. I cannot do the learning for a student. Without their consent and engagement in the learning process my efforts are inevitably limited and short lived. Therefore, one of the most important strategies I employ in my teaching is based on the skill and determination I have to find the “hook” that will ignite students’ passion and curiosity to engage in, and drive, their learning.

I believe that at the heart of all engagement is the importance of valuing and incorporating students’ ideas in the development and direction of a unit. Engagement is enhanced through such things as sharing intellectual control (Mitchell, 2007), immersion, problem solving and questioning. All of these elements support exploration and higher level thinking skills. In my experience, I have found that engaging students in learning requires unearthing a series of “hooks” that serve to motivate, stimulate and heighten a student’s interest and passion for the topic.

In this chapter, I share 2 case studies that are designed to illustrate my use of the ideas (above) to maximise student engagement in learning. As part of each case study, Key Understandings are highlighted which are important, initially in the pre-planning stages as they help to set the broad purposes of a unit of work. The importance of these key understandings then recur as they provide a platform from which feedback on student learning can be garnered throughout the teaching of the unit.

A CASE-STUDY OF A WELLBEING UNIT WITH A FOUNDATION/GRADE 1 CLASS

Key Understandings

At our school we have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Kathy Smith who has led our Level Planning sessions which we have at the beginning and end of every Term. Kathy consciously works to create conditions for learning (Smith, 2017) with us in our Team Planning sessions. Kathy has created an environment whereby she purposefully uses non-judgemental language and deliberately creates an environment in which we can share honestly because we know our ideas are not
being judged. Not only does Kathy create an environment that gives us the freedom to explore our own prior knowledge on a specific topic but she also models practice that represents quality teaching.

When planning a unit on Wellbeing, our planning meetings begin with exploring our prior knowledge by frequently and productively challenging our views and understandings. The approach stimulates our thinking about the topic and forces us to understand the topic from a range of alternative perspectives. These sessions shake up our ‘taken for granted’ assumptions (Brookfield, 1995, 2006) and push us to think differently and challenge the status quo. That shaking up is done by using techniques such as showing us a related provocative video clip from TED talks or starting with a contentious statement. In so doing, it prompts our initial reactions and group discussions from which we are encouraged to reflect on such things as stereotypical reactions and views and social bias.

Approaching unit planning together in this way has been critical in bringing to life my own awareness and understanding of the topic so that it is genuinely activated, challenged and expanded. In so doing, it has helped to create clarity about exactly what I want my students to learn. Brainstorming and bouncing ideas around in a non-judgemental manner with colleagues has also been valuable in helping me to articulate what we describe as Key Understandings. For the concept of Wellbeing, the team articulated 2 clear Key Understandings that were central to the unit, they were:

• I can communicate and recognise my feelings
• There are many ways I can manage my feelings

Prior Knowledge and Immersion

I have found that paying attention to my prior knowledge has helped me to focus attention on ‘content’ in different ways. It has helped to sensitise me to issues, questions, and ideas that might be used to shape the pedagogical experiences I am hoping to create for my students. Just as we have experienced in our Team Planning Meetings, so too students’ prior knowledge is about the ideas, information, views, attitudes and experiences that they bring with them to a topic of work. In order to bring out my students’ prior knowledge I consciously throw out a number of stimuli through media, pictures, stories and varying questioning techniques.

To start the process, I introduce the topic and ask students what they think (in this case) Wellbeing is? We then pull apart and explore our thoughts and ideas collectively in relation to the 2 key understandings of the unit (noted above). In practice I listen very carefully to each student and write down exactly what they say. I place all contributions on the Think Board with students’ names prominently displayed. As a class we constantly revisit these thoughts during the topic, adding emerging views and challenging earlier ideas. At this early stage of the unit, I design a pre-test which I will revisit later for a post-test to establish how each student’s thinking has changed over time.
Next I expose the students to an eclectic variety of stimuli on the topic of Wellbeing in the search for the “hooks,” i.e., *the hooks into genuine engagement*. There is a delicate balance between planning appropriate pedagogical experiences and being sensitive in responding to the learning that emerges from these experiences. Teacher judgement and personal experience guide me to hunt through a variety of possible stimuli that will challenge and engage my students. I may or may not use all of the resources I gather, it depends on the way they respond to the stimuli and the level of engagement generated from them, but having prepared to do so is important to appropriately manage the pedagogical situation as it develops.

*The Hook of Learning*

At one point I read a book called *How are you Peeling?* by Saxton Freymann and Joost Elffers (1999) which focused on feelings created through making faces on fruit and vegetables. It was bright and highly entertaining. The students laughed and were totally engaged and one of the students suggested that we all bring in fruit and vegetables and make our own fruit and vegetable “Emoticons!” This suggestion was
S. Quinn

greeted with rapturous and enthusiastic agreement by the whole class and we began
the practical steps of listing who would bring what. This provided the first hook into
our topic of Wellbeing.

Every class member made 1 or 2 fruit or vegetable “Emoticons” (see Figure 7.1)
over the next few days and we used them in a variety of ways throughout the unit.
In this example, the hook was not about their perceived enjoyment and desire
to do something that was fun, it was evident to me in the way, as learners, they
were emotionally invested in developing their understanding and ownership of
the topic. They were proud of their Emoticons and certainly enjoyed using them
in cross curriculum activities. For example we played “Match the feeling word to
the Emoticon” in literacy groups. We also sorted and classified colour, shape and
emotions using pictographs in Maths groups. They also named their Emoticons and
wrote creative narratives about their feelings when certain adventures happened.

Building on a Need to Know

To reinforce and extend students’ vocabulary about emotions I used the book How
Full is Your Bucket? by Tom Rath and Mary Rechmeyer (2007). The story follows a
little boy as he gradually becomes aware of his feelings and realizes that his actions
affect the emotional Wellbeing of himself and others around him. I wanted the
students to become emotionally involved with the main character and to recognize
not just when, but also why his emotions changed throughout the story. To make
that explicit I designed an activity where students were required to relate emotions
directly to the event that caused them. Using the events in the book, groups of three
were challenged to match the emotion with the event in the text. (Quite a few lessons
prior to this activity were devoted to broadening students’ vocabulary on feelings.
In fact one of the limits I placed on the groups was that they were not allowed to use
the words happy or sad.)

I have seen how peers teaching peers can be highly effective as a teaching tool
as it instantly engages both age groups. My students were the Foundation class
(first year of primary school), which is young children ages five and six. At that age
they often have very limited vocabulary to express feelings so I invited a Grade 3
class to collaborate with us in an activity where we brainstormed all the degrees of
emotions and made word lists that were proudly posted around the room. When I
asked the Grade 3 students to participate in our lessons, I knew my students would
be instantly enthralled by working one on one with an older peer. That proved to be
the second hook in the wellbeing unit.

Pushing Learning Further

I wanted to challenge the students with some “What if …” questions because they
stimulate lateral thinking and encourage creativity. This type of questioning requires
learners to draw not only on their new learning but also to make links with their
prior knowledge of the topic. I asked the class to consider the following question: “What if Felix’s Grandfather had not told him about the Invisible Bucket?” Next I set them the task of retelling the “different story,” demonstrating how Felix acted in the different circumstances. Asking the students to reflect on the original story and retell the new story required them to stand back and consider an alternative way for the main character to react to changed circumstances. The scaffold of the original narrative supported the process and the children worked in small groups to brainstorm and devise their new script.

Enthusiastic volunteers role-played their group version of the story in a variety of entertaining ways. This provided the third hook in the unit. At the end of each enactment, I asked the question: “Did this ending help Felix become more aware of the feelings of others or did the original text do a better job?” I was purposely seeking to help them link these ideas and make meaning through the activities in their everyday lives.

My experience of teaching young children has led me to see how, at five and six years of age, they operate essentially from an egocentric position. I wanted each child to try and imagine how Felix felt in each scenario so the role-plays were very helpful as they provided a safe way for my young learners to explore their own feelings.

**Overview**

I have highlighted 3 activities in this case study that functioned as hooks within the unit of Wellbeing. Whilst many activities were completed during the unit which furthered learning and engagement, pedagogically it was the hooks that launched the students into the experience of shared intellectual control and that initiated and directed further learning experiences. The creation of vegetable emoticons illustrates how an activity can become such a hook and, importantly, it was created and driven by the students. I was actually surprised that the story inspired such a series of activities (all student directed), but that is what is so important about what a hook creates. That is exactly what I am looking for in the classroom learning environment. Being aware and responsive to situations is an important aspect of teaching, but you don’t see these opportunities if you are not looking for them.

Something that has become clearer to me is that it is easy to confuse the hook with a fun activity. There is a difference. Sometimes a unit can be completed and no actual hook is recognizable. However, as a consequence of the shift in my pedagogical focus from the teacher to the student, I have become more confident about, and sensitive to, the hook. It is obvious when true engagement occurs, students take control of their learning. Actively supporting that process is what matters most to me.

**A CASE STUDY OF PLACE WITH GRADE 3**

During our Teacher Planning sessions around the concept of Place we all agreed relatively quickly on what we wanted our students to learn through the topic. The
resultant Key Understandings provided a platform from which our hopes and expectations for student learning might be based. The Key Understandings we developed were:

- A PLACE can mean different things to different people
- I belong to many PLACES and have different roles within them

Finding a Way in to Learning

I often use a video clip on a topic to initiate thinking and discussion. When we did the unit on Place, the hook came accidently through an ANZAC clip (provided by a colleague) that was designed to help children focus on ANZAC Day. We had already been discussing Place and the children had been exposed to several stimuli sessions to get our thoughts moving. I had suggested to the children that they view the ANZAC Clip while holding the following question in their minds: “Do the ANZACs have a PLACE in Australia today? Why?”

The clip was absolutely mesmerizing. It was a 3-D re-enactment of the dawn attack in the First World War on Gallipoli shown from both the Turkish and the Australian point of view (for further information please refer to the clip available at [http://www.abc.net.au/innovation/gallipoli/gallipoli2.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/innovation/gallipoli/gallipoli2.htm)). The whole class was instantly transfixed by the impact of the clip. The hook was well and truly established!

The whole class was alive with a shared excitement and passion. (I have noticed how acts of sharing as a class can be very unifying as they are often so tangible, so not only are students intellectually engaged, but the class seems to unite as a group in shared enthusiasm which builds bonds and creates a deeper relationship amongst the class.)

I wanted to give each student the room to explore the facets of Gallipoli that intrigued them most. We viewed the clip several times (by popular demand) then I asked the students to work in pairs to fill in a “From there to here” graphic organiser (see Figure 7.2 below). I like organising students to work in pairs as it helps to scaffold their thinking and bring out more of their prior knowledge as they reflect and make links on the information they have just viewed. Stopping to sort out their information allowed the students to reflect on how much they had learned so far but I could also see further value using the information to shape a post-test to revisit their learning at the end of the unit. In so doing, the students would have the opportunity to see how their thinking had changed and deepened during the unit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I knew</th>
<th>Links I made to get to ....</th>
<th>What I know now</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Figure 7.2. From there to here*
Building on Foundations of Learning

Building on from the first hook, I facilitated and gently directed students’ enthusiasm into getting them to think and question more deeply using the content as the motivation. I wanted to explore how questioning techniques would improve student learning. I was curious to discover which type of questions would engage the students and motivate learning. I wanted to keep it wide open and let them play with a variety of questions to gauge effectiveness.

I had already decided to use “Question Dice” with 5 W’s: Why; What; When; Who; Where; and, How. But this time I would pair the “Question Die” with a “Verb Die.” I chose verbs: must; did; might; should; will; and, would. Using these dice together could then generate question starters such as: “How might …?”; “Why would …?”; “How could …?” etc. In groups of 4, students were given the two different dice and asked to continue to roll them until they had exhausted all possible questions about Gallipoli that they wanted to explore. Students were provided with a question grid to record their questions (see Figure 7.3 below).

I wanted to see my students make connections to other facts and concepts. I was listening to their discussions as the groups used the dice and attempted to formulate
questions about what they wanted to know about Gallipoli and its Place in Australia today. Some groups were more successful than others while other groups settled for “fact” questions. I encouraged them to record all ideas, as these could act as a spring board for others in the group to think differently.

Once completed each group of 4 paired up with another group of 4 and shared their questions. They were asked to select what they thought were the 6 best questions to report back to the class. I then made up a master of all their questions which I used to design a mini project/investigation on “The Place the ANZACs have in Australia today.” One of the questions related to Monuments; looking at their relevance and location. I was amazed at the enthusiasm and engagement with which the students researched vast numbers of monuments from country towns to the National War Museum. One of my students took his parents to a suburban memorial (Kew Memorial) and took photographs with him proudly centre stage, for his project.

CONCLUSION

As is consistently reported in the research literature, there is great value in focused, ongoing teacher Professional Learning (Mockler, 2005; Webster-Wright, 2009; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Our Team Planning approach has led to invaluable professional learning about teaching and learning because of the conditions created in which we work, and because it has been sustained for many years. This approach has been important in helping us become much more conscious of, and explicit about our practice – not just in paying attention to what we do and how, but also why i.e., our pedagogical reasoning. As a consequence, teaching and learning have come together in ways that more closely align pedagogical intents and learning outcomes because the activities, strategies and procedures employed are designed with a purpose in mind.

The process of professional learning we have experienced together has led to a new understanding of teaching. It has been a journey which, in its early stages, was somewhat scary. For me personally I have made a transition from a very structured teaching style where curriculum was fully formed before delivery to one now where – although planned and developed – is done so much more with students’ ideas, input and learning in mind. I learnt to step across a divide into the unknown, (a new style of teaching) where I set the scene, but let the students fill in the picture. This necessitated a trial and error approach as I found my way and experienced failures. However, with the support available through our school’s approach to long-term professional learning and growth and the leadership of some wonderful facilitators, I persisted.

I now find myself teaching with a purpose that drives my search to find and develop students’ motivation and enthusiasm. The search to find the hook inspires excitement, as problem solving and student directed learning comes to the fore. To be able to say to students, “What a good question, how can we find the answer to
that?" has become a new defining feature of my practice and a new and meaningful measure of student engagement in learning.

NOTE

1 ANZAC Day is a time when Australians remember the actions and sacrifices of war.

REFERENCES


Suzette Quinn
Grade 3 teacher
8. BUILDING POSITIVE TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

A child’s life is like a piece of paper on which every passer-by writes their name on it … (Anonymous author)

Developing positive student-teacher relationships is the cornerstone of my teaching. Reflecting on the deeply held principles that shape my teaching always brings me back to those relationships. They provide me with rich insights into the professional knowledge I have, and continue to develop, as a teacher.

My teaching has been informed by the quote (above) which was displayed on the school office wall in my first year of teaching. That quote has shaped my deeply held principles but now reads more like:

A teacher’s life is like a piece of paper on which every student writes their name …

For me, focusing on positive student-teacher relationships helps to highlight the extent to which relationships with students need to be developed, what it takes to nurture them and how crucial they are in creating positive learning experiences for all students. Not surprisingly, across the educational literature, empowerment through positive student-teacher relationships has been well recognized as important (see for example, Carter et al., 2014), not least because the positive interactions students have with their teachers contributes to their overall wellbeing and success.

My experiences of teaching and collaborating with peers and colleagues throughout my career has reinforced the view that relationships matter and impact student learning. This chapter explores the issue of focusing on and developing positive teacher-student relationships from the perspective of a primary school teacher with 24 years teaching experience.

THE POWER OF STORY

Trusting relationships seem to naturally develop through sharing experiences through stories. It never ceases to surprise me how, as a teacher, having discussions with students that stem from childhood memories, or telling stories about taking risks, and doing so using a ‘student voice’ engages children. As a consequence, relationships tend to develop through the sharing of such experiences, and one
outcome I have observed over the years is the development of a positive learning environment because personal experience often resonates with students.

Whenever I share my own story about the day I was hit by a book that was flung toward me and given the strap because I didn’t know how to draw a margin, students understand my situation as a learner. Although the story is sad (and painful) in many respects, I use it to highlight the importance of ‘speaking up’ when it comes to not understanding the requirements of a task. It makes real what it feels like to be unsure as a learner, and how not ‘speaking up’ can lead to unforeseen outcomes that, in my case, were less than helpful. The point being that in my classes I want students to be confident to talk about their learning and to build their confidence. That requires trusting relationships and I see myself (the teacher) as key to those relationships being actively and explicitly developed.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Recently I was made aware that I was soon to be working with a student who had diverse learning needs. As I walked past the Principal’s office I noticed the student sitting with the principal. I wondered what had happened and how things would unfold. I knew the student would soon be coming in to my year level but I was taken by the fact that, as I passed the office, the discussion floating out toward me was about football teams.

Later, I engaged in a conversation about ‘favourite football players’ and it certainly caught the child’s attention. I consciously made a note of the conversation and took it away with me, purposefully storing it in my mind, thinking that it could be really handy at some time when he became a part of my class.

When the time came that the student was about to join my class, I approached the principal and said, “I know this student is really into Australian Rules Football, do you think it would be ok if I decorated my classroom with Sports Memorabilia?”

Having in mind the school’s vision:

At St Joseph’s School we aspire to live the values of Jesus within a welcoming Catholic community that celebrates and integrates faith, life, learning and culture; empowering all to live with integrity and to contribute to an ever changing world. (Staff Handbook, 2016)

I could see possibilities of linking how I might work in class in interesting ways with this student. Fortunately, our curriculum processes are based on the Multi Domain approach (Walsh, 2011) and an upcoming topic was ‘Relationships’; one I was certain would create opportunities for the children to connect with me as well as one another. Addressing the theme of ‘Relationships’ proved powerful in setting up a nurturing and inclusive environment for all our class members. With my new student in mind, I introduced some posters, flags and ‘pop up’ books across a variety of sports and favourite children’s authors. The theme, our school vision and my concern to build relationships combined in ways where I found myself thinking
carefully about what might be helpful in order to create a common interest from which a positive relationship might develop; initially for my new class member, but also more generally for the class as a whole.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT

The principal was very supportive and trusted me in working explicitly to invite the children to create an ‘inclusive’ classroom setting, one that catered for every child’s interests. I set up the classroom with a treasure chest and a corner with a ‘shop/café scene’ and when students walked in and saw the new layout of their room it not only sparked their interest but also made all of them feel comfortable. It soon became apparent that they looked forward to exploring different displays and resources on a daily basis.

Whenever I saw my ‘new student’ when I was in the playground, we engaged in conversation. I felt as though a trusting relationship was being developed, and I said to myself on a number of occasions, “Those conversations make him feel comfortable with me, he seems to be relating in a better way, that is fantastic.”

UNPLANNED CHANGES

Changing the setup of the classroom had some unexpected outcomes. Although the changes were initiated because of my new student, I increasingly noticed that it also helped children settle in to the day more easily when they arrived in an apprehensive and nervous state. Some other class members who I had noticed in the past came to school in a distracted manner, were now able to settle more quickly as they developed a new feel for their learning environment. As a consequence, relationships developed with me (their teacher) and their peers. I reflected on these changes and came to see that there was a growing sense of improvement in their resilience in light of a more positive day ahead – in comparison to that which I had noticed earlier but perhaps not paid sufficient attention to.

It was clear to me that there was a difference in the nature of the classroom, even in terms of the extent to which they achieved outcomes in the set time given to tasks. It made me realise the power in building positive relationships with individual students and that involves how the learning environment is organised, managed and interpreted. Roffrey’s (2008) research suggests that addressing relationships through the nature of learning environment can promote an optimal experience for individuals; that resonates strongly with my experience.

Developing meaningful relationships between the teacher and the individual child encourages positive pedagogical situations that foster effective social and emotional functioning, ultimately then, impacting learning outcomes. My conscious attention to relationship building as a result of paying attention to my new student, led me to more seriously pursue my students’ personal interests and stories in new ways. That meant that they became much more willing to address learning in a more engaged
manner. In that way, as Boynton and Boynton (2015) similarly noted, the anticipated learning outcomes are achieved; I would add that they are achieved without appearing overly ‘task driven’. I am firmly of the view, and the experience described in this chapter further supports my strength of conviction to the fact, that the interactions children have with their teachers throughout the school day offer an avenue through which they are able to learn the functional skills that contribute to their learning successes. More importantly the level to which children develop sustaining and nurturing relationships within and beyond the classroom environment can make a significant mark on their sense of belonging and satisfaction with school (Carter et al., 2014).

LEARNING SUPPORT STAFF MATTER

I have been fortunate that the leadership of our school value the role of ‘learning aides’. By overtly valuing our ‘learning support staff’ they too feel empowered to extend the work of the classroom teacher in important ways, adding to the sense of inclusion in our classes. The sense of working together gives me a strong sense of purpose and I feel as though I can develop positive relationships with my students. From the initial greeting in the morning to when they settle down and start an initial activity, I am able to work in collaboration with the support staff to focus our combined efforts on each individual’s learning intentions for the day. We start working with students in a supportive manner and this continues through all of the class.

I am confident that the notion of learning support staff ‘roving’ and helping so that I can work with an individual student fully complements my relationship building approach to pedagogy. It’s important to me that I work with individual students just as much as ‘the learning support staff’ might work with them; it is important for all of us to be seen to be genuinely concerned, and active in, helping students to move forward. Just as relationships between teacher and students, and students and students matter, so too does the relationship between teacher and learning support staff. Again, it establishes an effective and inclusive environment that facilitates team teaching and builds a culture of professional trust and collegiality. A most notable outcome for me has been how explicitly focusing on relationships has fostered a high level of trust and openness with students. That has led to greater support for them in taking risks and developing more trusting relationships within the learning environment; ultimately enhancing their schooling experience in tangible ways.

CONCLUSION

The teacher-student relationship is a privileged aspect of pedagogy. Building such relationships can support the development of social skills and understandings of what it means to work together in a classroom environment (for both students and teachers). Student development does not occur in isolation and the socially
‘connected’ environment has an impact on student wellbeing (Norish, Williams, O’Connor, & Robinson, 2013).

I have come to see that through the full trust of my principal and colleagues, I have been supported in my desire to develop more positive relationships in my classroom. It seems to me that my students see that I am interested in them, and the things that interest them. Doing so pays big learning dividends in terms of supporting risk taking and acknowledging mistakes – both the learner’s and the teacher’s.

Finally, as a Catholic school, it is increasingly apparent to me how the greeting, administration, morning prayers and day to day discussions of family and life experiences also contribute to relationship building. The Catholic context of the school provides a very strong platform for relationship building with our community. Really listening to children with diverse needs has helped me to better understand children who are nervous or may exhibit behaviours that draw attention to them. Connectedness, closeness (Baker, 2006) and relatedness (Lopez et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2007) impact significantly on students’ social and emotional experience and I feel that it is imperative that all students have equal access to forming positive and engaging relationships with their teachers. In so doing, the affective domain can dramatically influence the cognitive domain and that is something that I think receives far too little attention in the literature. Everything about learning does not need to focus on the cognitive, my experience reinforces for me the power of the affective. I think it is a message we should all remember when thinking about the nature of teaching and learning.

The better you know [your students] the better you will be able to teach them. When you know your students’ individual needs, you can adjust your approach to their learning styles, [and] emotional makeup. Never underestimate the effect you may have on your students’ lives. (Boyes, 2013, p. 23)

NOTE

1 Many lifelong practices are interwoven throughout the school’s vision statement and need to be taken into account when planning and developing positive student-teacher relationships. Inclusive and nurturing approaches are like ‘super glue’ that binds trusting relationships and sets the foundations for a child’s development. Their trust in us is an essential characteristic in creating an inclusive culture and supporting student voice.

REFERENCES


*Victoria Dounis*

*Grade 3 teacher*
9. NAVIGATING THROUGH GUIDED INQUIRY

This chapter recounts the development of a process termed Guided Inquiry. After briefly considering the initial school context and the Multi-Domain approach to curriculum planning and development, the chapter then explains the journey associated with inquiry, designed to enable students to engage in a more meaningful and independent manner into their learning by building their skills and knowledge of inquiry. The journey depicts a range of conversations, case studies and experiences that led to changes in my practice and how I understood those in relation to my students’ learning. The chapter encapsulates the nature of professional learning at the heart of my practice and illustrates how that was fostered through the practices and processes developed and refined at our school.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

St Joseph’s is a Catholic Primary school within the Immaculate Conception Parish of Hawthorn, Melbourne. It is an inner city school set amongst local businesses, public transport and skyscrapers. It currently has four hundred and eight enrolments and a staff of more than forty people. With fifteen classes, the school promotes a strong focus on contemporary teaching and learning with particular regard to Science. The focus emphasises the need for students to learn how to learn, to exercise learning agility and develop skills that will help students continue to grow and learn in a future world that is ever-changing.

The families that make up the community are of the middle to upper socio-demographic; predominantly of Anglo-Saxon descent. These families are highly educated and have similar expectations for their children. The predominant pedagogical approach at St Joseph’s is one of constructivism (Gunstone, 2000) which fosters the development of shared learning experiences though which students’ knowledge is constructed.

Having taught across numerous levels in the school, with four years teaching Grades 5 and 6 and three years with Grades 1 and 2, I have seen the benefit of experience at both ends of the primary school spectrum. Those experiences have been important in shaping the insights I have gained into student learning – how that develops by their senior years – and the value of taking action in the junior years to support that development and growth.
MULTI DOMAIN THROUGH AN INQUIRY APPROACH

Multi Domain is a framework that we developed to consider, construct and deliver our curriculum in a meaningful, student centred and connected way. It was created by looking into the natural connection between the curriculum and life through a ‘concepts-based’ approach rather than as propositionally based syllabuses (Walsh, 2011). Multi Domain is brought to life through an inquiry approach.

In the context of the Australian Curriculum, Multi Domain encompasses working through our agreed curriculum topics based on a combination of Disciplinary (Science, Economics, Geography, History) and Interdisciplinary (Thinking, Communication and I.C.T) fields, in concert with addressing and responding to Physical, Personal and Social Learning (Personal Learning, Interpersonal Learning, Civics and Citizenship and Health).

Initially, it may sound as if the Multi Domain is about squeezing many fields into one whilst also trying to address a range of dimensions in a period of about three and a half hours across a week. But in reality, as the school protocol suggests, it is designed to:

… promote deep student learning and ensure curriculum content is meaningful for, and connected to, each student’s needs; curriculum content is selected by teachers. Key concepts and through lines are taught on a two year cycle and these drive the curriculum of the school. Students’ individual needs, interests, current knowledge, questions and learning styles inform the planning for units of work.

The eight key concepts are Identity & Diversity, Change, Sustainability, Decision Making, Relationships, Systems, Place and Wellbeing.

St Joseph’s delivers AusVELs through a whole school Multi Domain approach. Staff are expected to have a thorough knowledge of the Learning Focus, Standards and Content Descriptors for each domain at their level and one level above and below. Specific curriculum content for the subject areas of Science, Humanities; History, Economics and Geography, Health, Civics and Citizenship, Information and Communication Technology, Communication, Interpersonal Development, Personal Learning and Thinking Processes are mapped onto the planning documents, retrospectively at the end of Terms One and Three, and prior to the teaching of Terms Two and Four.

The eight concepts were developed using a whole school professional learning approach led by educational consultant, Cathy Dimitrikopoulos. Staff followed a series of thinking routines and, after reviewing the curriculum, were asked to reflect on the students in their community and decide upon robust concepts that they thought it important for the students to understand in order to actively contribute to the world. Through rigorous dialogue and debate, these were refined, categorised
and reshaped to eight (for a more detailed explanation see, Smith, Loughran, Berry, & Dimitrakopoulos, 2011).

DELIBERATING THE CONCEPTS: THE INQUIRY APPROACH

Inquiry learning is a pedagogical process that focuses on the interaction between student and content as the learning experience and, in turn, asks the teacher to become a learning activator. There are many models of this but all emphasise the student at the centre, following a process to come to a new understanding, or place, of knowing. The concept of inquiry learning, for me, sits in stark contrast to a more traditional approach to teaching and learning where the teacher acts as the fount of all knowledge and, using a top-down approach, fills students’ brains with content. Further, inquiry learning promotes both personalised and differentiated learning by recognising that all children learn at different rates, in different ways and for different reasons.

My career has exposed me to many inquiry approaches including the work of Kath Murdoch, Wiggins and McTighe, Deb Vietri, Jeni Wilson & Lesley Wing Jan and John Loughran. All of these educators and academics use the idea of a ‘framework’ to highlight a process where students engage in learning at differing entry and exit points, for different reasons and with varying outcomes.

In my time at St Joseph’s, our approach has moved from Kath Murdoch’s (2015) stages of Integrated Inquiry (Finding Out through to Taking Action) to John Loughran’s brain-based, nonlinear stages of thinking (Prior Knowledge, Processing, Linking, Translation, Synthesising and Metacognition, represented in Figure 9.1 below) described in his book What Expert Teachers Do (Loughran, 2010). To enact this approach, teachers use the Multi Domain framework where numerous domains are covered within a unit, which engages students in the acquisition of new thinking, skills, understandings and knowledge around a given concept.

The change we initiated came about as a response to what we could see emerging in current educational research about learning and the curriculum and our sense of a need to refresh the approach we used to teach the remaining areas of the curriculum. The school’s leadership observed that many teachers were using and implementing an inquiry approach in different ways and so decided to support a new approach by putting concentrated time and energy into developing it consistently across the school. The approach developed throughout the school as a consequence of the passion and drive of an experienced lead teacher, a team of staff who attended a professional learning program together, and a pilot group of teachers who trialled it within their classrooms. Further and at a later stage, a leadership role was created to facilitate and build teacher capacity in this area. This was titled Multi Domain Leader, a role which I took up.

The development of, and transition into, our approach to planning and action for teaching, learning and the curriculum, has taken strategic planning, time, reflection,
thoughtful consideration and regular reshaping. As a consequence, working toward developing a whole school approach has required professional learning designed to support a deeper understanding of our pedagogical processes and purposes. The professional learning approach developed is what Smith (2016) has described as supporting and trusting teachers as professionals to develop and respond to the learning needs of their context; an approach of working with teachers rather than attempting to mandate or dictate change in a top-down manner.

Figure 9.1. Non-linear stages of thinking framework as per Loughran (2010)

THE CRITICAL INCIDENT: A TIPPING POINT

A critical incident (Tripp, 1993) can be described as an experience or episode that causes one to see things differently. A critical incident that stood out for me was based on a trend I could see through my involvement in Leadership Team discussions and in general dialogue with my colleagues. I heard a concern consistently being expressed about the ‘crowded curriculum’, i.e., not being able to provide access to enough curriculum content through inquiry while, almost paradoxically, seeking to work with students’ prior knowledge to drive learning.

I was struck by a recurring question:

How do we, as educators, attend to the demands of a thoroughly designed and full curriculum whilst implementing it with a pedagogy that rings true to contemporary teaching and learning?

At St Joseph’s we engage with highly regarded and accomplished educational consultants to challenge our thinking and influence our pedagogical practice. Our sessions with these consultants have been running for six years and always emphasise the Vygotskian beginning point of learning (Vygotsky & Rieber, 1988).
In these sessions, teachers are stimulated to explore their own understandings of the current concept, attend to student prior knowledge through pre-assessment and determine the understandings that they want students to gain whilst engaging them in meaningful curriculum content. This usually takes the form of an act of stimulus (reading or short clip), dialogue, questioning and then decision-making.

Because these sessions tend to be interpretive in nature, one of the challenges for teachers is to move away from their new understanding and design their unit based on inquiry; whilst still meeting the needs of the curriculum. This can mean a unit shaped purely by students’ prior knowledge could end up engaging students in a small amount of content but lack breadth or engagement across domains. This, in turn, means that implementation into classrooms can look different. My critical incident was based on hearing statements from my colleagues such as:

“I didn’t get to teach that part.” or,
“Time ran out and we didn’t get to that.”

Then I noticed how those statements developed into:

“We’ll have to do that next term.” or,
“We can do that as a stand-alone lesson.”

These statements suggested to me that the inquiry process would benefit from some reflection and that we could do with more opportunities to refine our practice of using the inquiry process. I felt a sense of unease with the intent and the actions not necessarily lining up in a harmonious way.

Our approach to the inquiry process is designed to begin curriculum design using students’ prior knowledge through pre-assessment. It asks us to be led by students’ understandings, interests and wonderings; to pursue quality teaching and learning. However, it does carry challenges. One of the most important considerations is that developmentally, junior students do not explicitly understand how an inquiry or scientific process works and hence struggle to independently follow up and explore their own wonderings.

The impact of that was clear through statements like:

“They don’t know anything about ….” or,
“They’ve no idea how to …”

It seems clear that teachers need to explicitly model these skills as part of their practice while also balancing the curriculum. In my own case, following some informal collegial dialogue, the challenges became all the more clear to me.

UNDERSTANDING THE PEDAGOGIC CHALLENGE

I had been involved in a couple of personally powerful professional learning programs including Catholic Education Melbourne’s CAPS (Contemporary Approaches to Primary Science) and EPL (Emerging Pedagogical Leaders). I was confident about
my practice and understood the importance of clear and meaningful student centred approaches based on conceptual understandings. My main challenge was to find a way to give students authentic access to curriculum content that would support both the ‘throughline’ (a succinct statement of understanding that links the learning across the school) and understandings of that concept under consideration. Further, I knew it was equally important to shape not only the beginning of the unit but also the conclusion.

A concept we had been working on was Decision Making and our throughline was ‘The decisions that we make will impact on our quality of life and that of those around us’. I knew the best place to start was with students’ own experiences; especially as they (students in the lower level classes in particular) are still quite egocentric in their processing and thinking. Working from their prior views would allow for strong engagement and would create a meaningful entry point for all students. This was also important to me because I wanted each student to make sense of their own learning in their own way and to have more ownership over their learning.

The demonstration of successful learning for this throughline would be students making decisions about and for themselves: their bodies, minds and emotions. I thought more deeply about this intention and looked for the science in it. I decided to look at it through the students’ eyes and look into the decisions society was asking them to make. I could see that advertising in nutrition and the decisions that children made about what they wanted to put into their body was very persuasive. On further thought, I wondered if students knew how much sugar they were actually consuming on a daily basis and whether I could create something to replicate the chemical reactions that are created in the human body when food and drink is ingested.

I raised the idea in our Team Planning Time (TPT) and together we fleshed it out some more and decided that a three-day science experiment with foods would engage students kinaesthetically and behaviourally. There would be a certain amount of content input from teachers about the chemicals that make up food and drink, the science involved and some of the implications of nutritional advertising.

I left this TPT with the seed of an idea for a new Guided Inquiry. I wondered if using a short amount of the term, approximately three weeks after pre-assessment, to design an inquiry unit explicitly designed to teach the skills and any chosen content around nutrition, might begin to address some of the complexities that we recognised we were facing. I took the idea home and dug deeper. I arrived at a point where I decided to use the upcoming science experiment as a formal trial of Guided Inquiry.

I had been confronted by, and now was choosing to respond to, a critical incident in my practice. I could see a learning need and came to a point where better understanding by working through a Guided Inquiry was no longer an idea but a reality and a professional challenge.

TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

Guided Inquiry is a process that is developed to facilitate the explicit teaching of skills that supports students’ own personal inquiry skills. It also effectively develops
thinking skills, creates conditions for deep learning and develops lines of interest that connect to overall understandings. Consequently, it is an opportunity to provide content to students in a meaningful and authentic way. Although Guided Inquiries may well look different at different times and in different contexts, there are commonalities. There is an underlying purpose of scaffolding content and skills that students need for successful independent inquiry.

Guided Inquiry typically fits in well in Multi Domain sessions/units and through a whole class approach. Depending on the skills and content, learning can occur anywhere from a classroom, to a garden through to an excursion; Guided Inquiry is not limited by the learning environment.

Guided Inquiry is therefore a process whereby a teacher designs a short three or four week unit, linked to the term’s main concept and based on a combination of curriculum content and student needs; all with the purpose of further scaffolding student learning. A Guided Inquiry is strategic, engaging and often an experience in which students’ thinking is challenged. It has its roots in Vygotskian theory. Teachers are required to ascertain the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Rogoff, 1984) to ensure that students are accessing relevant skills and content to meet their next point of need. In order to do this, it requires teacher intuition and experience, to look for signifiers of that which students do and do not know.

One of the challenges of putting the Guided Inquiry process into practice is making it work for everyone involved. I needed a way in which to enable all participants to actively enter in the process. I needed a shared language that as a class we could use together. Developing a shared language, as in the case of scientists, ensures that interpretations come from a similar place, providing a standpoint for comparing and contrasting and allowing participants to speak more readily about their experiences.

Defining the purpose for a Guided Inquiry helps to weed out ‘busy work’ and helps to guide the core experiences that are to be created. In my experience, any inquiry can be at risk of being muddied with busy work that can confuse or mislead the learner.

Knowing that inquiry is a process and teaming this with the knowledge that students at this developmental age benefit from visual references, I decided that each Guided Inquiry would benefit from a schema or framework, which would help the students to understand and follow the process but also reference what they were doing throughout the different stages. There is no correct or perfect schema or framework for a given Guided Inquiry. In my experience, it is best created in response to the context. This may be where the intellectual ownership is shared between teacher and student (Mitchell, 2010). I identified the language that I wanted us all to use and created simple and easy to follow visuals for the students. For the two case studies that will be outlined below, the schema was different. One used a strong Scientific Process approach and the other used an Inquiry Research Model (see Figure 9.2). Both schema were used to introduce and make concrete a shared language with students.
Through the framework (Figure 9.2) I was able to design learning and build a shared language, but experience told me that I needed to articulate for students what successful learning looked like. Doing so is an important part of any learning design because, once again, it puts the student at the centre, allows for meaningful feedback and explicitly demonstrates to the learner that which they need to achieve.

Teaming Learning Intentions with the inquiry process helps to bring students into the learning process, it encourages them to take ownership and is an explicit statement that encourages them to visualise what they hope to achieve. Writing Learning Intentions for a Guided Inquiry can often seem daunting but I persevered and wrote them in student voice, for example:

“I can feel what sugar does to my body” or, “I can paraphrase information using a thesaurus.”

There were times where the Learning Intentions became multi layered with more than one criteria but this was always dependent on what I was observing throughout the students’ learning journeys and adapted accordingly, for example:

“I can communicate what carbohydrates did to my body using Google Slides.”

My aim was to always write the Learning Intentions in ways that would be accessible for students, hence using ‘I’ language. Through the Learning Intentions, students had an entry point into their learning, a shared language in which to work and a framework of learning as a guide.
CASE STUDY 1: CHEMICAL SCIENCE

Being Term 4, I was aware of what had been taught and learnt already throughout the year in my Grade 1 and 2 class. The class comprised 8 Grade 1s and 18 Grade 2s. Therefore, I knew what remained of the AusVELS (see footnote 1 for explanation) to be learnt. I had also developed the view that my students were becoming critical thinkers but they needed more explicit knowledge and skill in order to do so independently.

After talking with a colleague (Ann) about the way our school had built up a strong culture of Scientific Literacy (an awareness that Science is everywhere and a desire to seek out Science) we agreed that it had not managed to maintain momentum in regard to innovatively covering all of the Science content. The essence of that discussion was:

Ann: I think there is a concern that our science is not always very ‘sciencey’ and I think you can use a topic like nutrition where you can talk about sugars and how they break down within your system and what they turn into to teach something very scientific. I’m not sure if we have done a lot of that. You probably have a lot more this year with the garden. We have certainly taught lots of scientific skills such as classifying but not, say, chemical facts side of science.

Rikki: Yes and I’m thinking now that could be a very good experiment where we might be able to choose 2 or 3 groups where one group eats sugars, another group eats fruits on one particular day and one group has carbohydrates and they can record their responses about how they are feeling such as if they are feeling full of energy or tired or empty or full. It could be a ‘chemical science experiment’ based on the perceived reactions of their bodies. That might be something throughout the unit that we consider doing.

Ann: I know we have talked about this before … on our multi domain journey many teachers have shifted from leading a whole class inquiry to facilitating students to have their own focus, their own inquiry. I think I am beginning to do a full circle, I’ve been immersed in that style of inquiry for long enough that I am really seeing the need for the teacher to step up and make decisions about what the students need to learn about and what the teacher needs to teach. We have gone very ‘inquiry’ and that has been good for our school but I am now ready to be that bridge between the everyday science and a scientific understanding.

Rikki: So you are saying you want to take the reins back a little, to guide and make connections?

Ann: Yes I do, I think we are teaching the skills of science well and I would love us to develop a continuum of scientific skills across the year.
levels but I think we now need to also concentrate on the teaching of scientific knowledge.

Rikki: Yes I agree.

Ann: Inquiry is important, it’s important that they feel like they own it but it’s also important that scientific knowledge is taught.

Rikki: I’ve been trialling a guided inquiry with another colleague and it is like you are saying. In the first 3 to 4 weeks the teacher knows the scientific skills and knowledge that must be taught in relation to the term’s concept. They develop a whole class inquiry where they might learn about sugar and then it opens up from weeks 5 onwards to individual inquiry. You need to look into what content you have and have not taught each year.

Ann: That sounds great. I think there are a group of teachers now on staff that are ready to move on in their journey.

From that discussion I decided to use Guided Inquiry as a way of engaging my students in the specific skills involved in the Scientific Process as well as building their knowledge around Chemical Science. I wanted students to come to understand that the things that we put into our bodies have different chemicals in them and that when we consume something; the body breaks it apart and uses it. Further, I wanted students to use bodily-kinaesthetic engagement to feel the effect of three types of foods on their body and hopefully make decisions based on what they had learnt about the chemicals in the three types of food.

In our Team Planning Time, it was suggested that the three different food types be sugars, carbohydrates and fruit and vegetables. As a team, we set the control parameters of time, activity and amount of food to ensure some consistency in the experiment. We prepared a letter to go home to parents, informing them of this exciting learning we had planned. All that was left was to bring it to the students. We chose to bring the students in, to create a need to know, by using contention. We chose a short documentary piece on sugar and how the food industry has replaced fat with sugar and the effect that has on the human body. This really got the students talking and I could tell that they had made connections to brands, tastes and the idea of food changing the body. I could hear it in their remarks as they responded to the clip:

“They’re adding sugar when they take out the fat?”
“Are they allowed to do that?”
“Oh, I eat that, it’s yummy.”

These type of responses told me we were in! I knew it was now time to propose the idea of an experiment but I wanted it to be suspenseful so I told them we would be conducting little experiments, just like scientists do every day, using foods that we would eat.

The buzz in the room was both deafening and rewarding. In the next session I introduced the need for us to use a shared language of the Scientific Process using
terms such as: Ask; Predict; Test; Observe; Gather Data; and, Conclude. Bringing them back to the video clip that they had watched, I asked them what they had been wondering about in terms of food and their bodies. After a lengthy discussion and throwing a few ideas around, we came up with a question:

“How do the chemicals in food and drink change my body?”

Of course the students all knew about sugar rushes and highs. They could also explain the need to eat to keep alive. Many students could also identify important foods for growth such as meats and dairy. There was, however, little knowledge or experience around how food and drink make our body feel or behave. This was where I wanted the inquiry to begin.

I set up a wall display of the scientific process (see Figure 9.3) and we discussed how students could also use a scientific journal to record their observations and data.

![Image of the scientific process](image-url)

*Figure 9.3. The scientific process introduced to students*

When the time came to conduct the experiment, students did so over three consecutive days, each day consuming different foods and completing the same tasks – exercise and then mindfulness colouring in to see the effect that it had on
their focus, concentration and energy levels. Students began to make direct links to what the food was doing to their bodies. This was evident in their journal reflections.

**Carbohydrates**

“I feel full and heavy”

“When I was running I felt sluggish and out of breath”

**Fruit and Vegetables**

“I feel good and it was easy to concentrate”

“I think it’s given me good energy because I feel better than yesterday”

**Sugary Foods**

“I feel all jumpy inside”

“I feel a bit crazy and can’t sit still”

Further, students were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1–10 (0 being lowest and 10 the highest) in the areas of focus, energy and feelings. In general, the ratings that students gave themselves showed that they had gained an understanding of what the three types of food did to their bodies and how it made them feel.

At the end of the week, students were asked to look over their data and make some individual conclusions about their findings. This took a little bit of scaffolding using sentence starters such as:

“I noticed that my body …” and,

“I can see that ________ makes my body ______”

Further, upon sharing some of these findings with others they were able to make clear statements about their results such as:

“Sugary foods are not very good for your body because they give you a sugar high and then you feel tired.”

“Fruit and vegetables make you feel good and help you to focus when you learn.”

“Carbohydrates make you feel heavy but also give you energy.”

Having worked through the approach in this way I started to ask myself, “How do I know that the skills I was hoping to develop in my students were being attained?” If I wanted students to exhibit skills of noticing and reflection, what evidence was there? I turned to their science journals. In some cases, students did not find a written reflection useful and there was not strong evidence of their reflective thinking. Knowing that not all students learn the same way I conducted short interviews with these students to gain an understanding of their learning and their ability to reflect. In all cases, given the opportunity to reflect verbally, the students demonstrated the skills I was looking for.
That outcome helped me recognise that in future science journals, I would need to provide different ways for students to represent their reflections and conclusions – perhaps not all ‘written’ – maybe I could include verbal, visual, pictographic and written so that I could cater for numerous learning styles.

This experience illustrated to me how Guided Inquiry can scaffold and support the building of skills and knowledge that support students to pursue their own inquiries. In this instance, after the Guided Inquiries, I brought the students back to their pre-assessments and initial questions. This provided yet another opportunity for them to recognise how their thinking had changed as it had been three weeks since they recorded their prior knowledge. Reflecting on their learning was an important way of helping them see how they had developed their inquiry skills and the knowledge derived of that experience.

CASE STUDY 2: FOOD WEBS

The following year, I found an opportunity to build on the use of a Guided Inquiry with my Grade 2 class. Three of the students in the class were Grade 1s I had taught the previous year (members of Case Study 1 experience) and so I decided to use them as my experts – I gave them an active role in the thinking and skill demonstration needed for the Guided Inquiry that I was developing.

The concept was Relationships and given the two-year cycle of Multi-Domain topics, this would be the second time the students in this year level had explored this concept so I knew that they had a foundation to draw on. I therefore knew that I could quickly dig deep and make rich links across many areas of the curriculum. I brought these ideas to the table at our Team Planning Time and it similarly influenced the choice of pre-assessment that the team designed.

With a science lens, I decided that I wanted the students to explore relationships from a biological perspective and develop a deep understanding of food chains and further, food webs. To bring depth to the learning, I wanted students to work in small teams to develop their interpersonal skills, use Google Slides to present their work and also communicate their learning orally to the class and to the school via an assembly. Finally, I wanted to find a resource that would allow students to use the scientific skills of categorising, questioning and reasoning to explore the content.

My main vehicle would be a tactile resource from the Gould League (Gould League Food Webs Kit-Primary, see Figure 9.4; available at gould.org.au) where the various components that make up three different food webs are provided in visual form. From previous experience, I knew this to be a highly engaging and interactive resource for children.

Before introducing the resource to the students I simply asked them, “Are all living things connected?” Their responses varied and showed some misconceptions and misunderstandings.

Reading through the Teacher Resource Book, the language the students needed became apparent, so together, we unpacked new terminology such as producer,
consumer, decomposer and predator to name but a few. Given that the students knew the overall question that we were trying to answer (Are all living things connected?), I introduced them to the resource and, breaking them into three teams, asked them to categorise the living things as either: producer; consumer; or, predator. This led to a lot of discussion and debate, showing that some of the teams were not able to work in harmony or that some students had not understood the new language. I attended to these needs through incidental teaching opportunities and the categorising session was a success. Photos were collected as evidence of the skill being used and students were given a follow up ‘deepening’ activity to complete individually.

In the next session, I told the students that a food chain was a small amount of living things that are connected in a linear fashion where there is a producer, consumer and predator. The students used the resource again, this time in different teams, to come up with some simple food chains and reason how they were connected. This was the beginning of students demonstrating their understanding of living things in relationship.

Following this, we worked as a whole class to explore food webs. The students instantly likened a food web to a spider web and we used this visual representation to introduce the term ‘interconnected’ to our shared language for the topic. We continued to work together to make one food web, and in so doing I modelled the use of reasoning with the students (e.g., “The eagle is a predator because it has claws and a curved beak”). That led into the next activity where I asked them to make food webs without my support.
In this session I broke the students into three new teams and each was given a different food web to construct. In these teams, I intentionally mixed strong personalities because I knew this process would require negotiation and reasoning, requiring the team to come to consensus. I had evidence that students were able to categorise the living things so I set them to work only stating the Learning Intention ‘I can make a food web to show how living things are interconnected’ (see Figures 9.5 and 9.6).

*Figure 9.5 Students categorising using new terminology*

*Figure 9.6. Students working in teams to construct food webs*
I became a rover in the classroom asking questions, probing their thinking and listening to their reasoning. Occasionally, students required redirection but the evidence of engagement was strong:

“That can’t be a consumer because it eats meat.”
“Why can’t this be a producer?”
“Is this kangaroo connected to the gum tree?”
“Why did you put that there?”

So far, I had strong evidence of categorising, questioning and reasoning. The clincher was when I decided to take it one step further and see where the students would go if I explored the ‘non’ examples. The students were learning under the assumption that all of the living things they were given were part of the food web so I decided to explore endangerment and extinction by asking the students to remove one producer and discuss the effects. The same question was repeated for both a consumer and a predator and the resultant discussion was exceptional.

“There won’t be any balance because they will have nothing to eat.”
“If there was no predator, there will be too many consumers and they will eat all of the grass (producer).”
“Without consumers, predators will have nothing to eat and die.”

And finally and most profoundly:

“Without the sun as a producer, we will all die.”

CONCLUSION: MY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

At a meta-level, I see a need to look at what I am attending to through Guided Inquiry and why. Both of the above case studies demonstrate the ability to attend to a combination of curriculum content, meaningfully woven together so that students can themselves, create meaning out of a shared experience. The guided elements only refer to me as the teacher adopting a different form of intellectual control; at this stage, in terms of what is to be learnt and in some cases, how. This differs from a traditional definition of inquiry because even though it has the student at the centre of the learning experience, the concept, skills and content are directed by me with the intention of preparing and empowering students for the return to traditional inquiry learning.

I need to consider Guided Inquiry in this way to discern the differences between a Guided Inquiry and a traditional, independent inquiry and to make clear that I am meeting the goals that I had set out to meet within the Guided Inquiry. Often inquiry learning can take on a life of its own (which is never a bad thing) but as teacher, my meta-awareness is essential to keep the learning directed and the momentum high.

There were many times along the learning path where issues arose. Some were small and others, more prominent. For example, I mentioned earlier in the chapter
about issues with the science journal and providing more accessible ways for students to reflect on their learning. I see the science journal as something that I could build on. Not only could I improve on the way that students reflect on their learning but I could also further develop the way in which they actually record their thinking and learning. Retrospectively, I would say that the way I was asking the students to record their thinking was best suited to how I could gather evidence and assess them rather than how they might record their thinking.

Other issues that arose were misconceptions. Often these can be addressed through questioning such as: “Tell me more about that”; “Why do you think that?”; or, “Tell me about when you first learnt about that.” Such moments create opportunities for students to justify their thinking and/or reconsider their views about the concept.

My experience with Guided Inquiries engaged me in learning and changed my professional thinking in many ways. Initially and above all, it required me to engage metacognitively and to consider my practice and my students’ learning. Further, my inquiry has forced me to continually return to the students and, at times, break away from my preferred teaching style, thus ensuring that they remain at the centre of my pedagogic planning and decision-making. I feel as though I have developed more of a growth mindset in which I see teaching more as being about opportunities rather than challenges.

Educating using Guided Inquiries has really worked in my context. They were designed and developed in response to a need which came to the fore through a critical incident. Guided Inquiries created an environment in which my students learnt essential skills, content, concepts and developed rich understandings that enabled them to make sense of inquiry as a process. They conducted and managed their own inquiries which, in turn, led to further development of their skills, content, concepts and understandings. For me, I am now much more conscious of being open to critical incidents; they invite me to see change as a positive influence on teaching and learning.

NOTE

1 “AusVELS is the Foundation to Year 10 [K-10] curriculum that provides a single, coherent and comprehensive set of prescribed content and common achievement standards, which schools use to plan student learning programs, assess student progress and report to parents. AusVELS incorporates the Australian Curriculum learning areas for English, Mathematics, History and Science only, within the curriculum framework first developed for the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) see http://ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/

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SECTION 3
DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE
Teaching is more complex than what it appears to be; it is problematic by nature and requires a high degree of professional knowledge and skill. So how did I arrive at this understanding, how has this thinking changed my professional practice; and, how has this thinking positioned me as a teacher researcher? This chapter sets out to explore these issues through my experience as a teacher researcher.

TEACHING IS A COMPLEX BUSINESS

Teachers teach or at least that’s what we see teachers doing but what else is taking place as teachers work to determine how best to respond to student needs, interests and experiences? What skills, knowledge and expertise are required as a teacher works to create opportunities for student learning? Teachers teach, all the while responding to the realities of their classroom; realities that occur consistently throughout the teaching day. How can the knowledge they draw on be further developed to contribute more widely to understanding the nature of learning and teaching?

We know that professional knowledge is key in any career but in teaching, professional knowledge extends far beyond the content and instruction and into the thinking that guides practice. Teachers research their students, and indeed their own practice every day. This researching mostly occurs tacitly or some might say naturally in a teacher’s everyday thinking, however, recognising that research is a key to quality learning is vital for teachers.

As noted earlier, this chapter explores teaching from a teacher researcher perspective and in so doing, aims to promote the need for teachers to actively take on research projects within their own classrooms. From my experience as a teacher researcher, I have found the value of research projects to be crucial in further developing and enhancing learning opportunities for my students. They have also provided opportunities for me to take notice of my practice in ways that have reignited my enthusiasm for teaching.

I have participated in Professional Learning (PL) programs where I was positioned as an active learner and key decision maker. The learning conditions in these programs supported me and my fellow colleagues to think differently about our teaching and value our expertise and professional knowledge. It set me on a
A path of learning which valued the use of research projects within my classroom not only for the gains they could provide for my students but the gains that I could make as a teacher. This has led to my interest in what research has suggested matters in advancing education, such as the importance of teacher and student dialogue in the joint construction of scientific learning.

THE VALUE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

I have been lucky to have been involved in great Professional Learning (PL) over the years; more recently a series of PL programs run by both Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM) and the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Through such programs I met people that became mentors and today remain a continual source of inspiration for me. These programs have made me begin to think about questions such as: “What makes PL worthwhile and influential for teachers?” and, “What is quality in PL?”

On reflection I have come to see that it is the conditions for learning that these programs established that proved so powerful and influential. The conditions that had greatest impact on me, firstly as the learner, and now as the teacher were: valuing student voice and providing opportunities for students to take action; and, valuing teacher voice and regarding the prior knowledge of teaching when entering into inquiry. Such PL programs made me feel truly valued and respected, and not only was this to become the catalyst for how I established my classroom environment and viewed my students but I also began to see that a teacher’s voice, my voice, was important, and that research into my own teaching would not only improve my teaching and my students’ learning, but would provide the interest for me to remain in teaching.

Through one PL program I was encouraged to consider and reflect on the term ‘quality learning’ and what it might entail. I am sure that most teachers would say they strive to provide quality learning and that quality teaching leads to quality learning, but perhaps it is not so common for teachers to be expected to be able to state what quality learning really entails. My experience suggests that teachers seem to be expected to just ‘do teaching’ and that our talk is more about actions, not so much about intent or the underlying reasoning that informs our practice. So I found it interesting to be introduced to Mitchell et al.’s (2009) list of principles of teaching for quality learning through the PL programs. His principles resonated with me and encouraged me to think differently about my practice, my students’ learning, and my knowledge of, and in, practice. Those principles were:

- Share intellectual control with students.
- Create occasions when students can work out part (or all) of the content or instructions.
- Provide opportunities for choice and independent decision-making.
- Provide a diverse range of ways of experiencing success.
Promote talk that is exploratory, tentative and hypothetical.
Encourage students to learn from other students’ questions and comments.
Build a classroom environment that supports risk-taking.
Use a wide variety of intellectually challenging teaching procedures.
Use teaching procedures that are designed to promote specific aspects of quality learning.
Develop students’ awareness of the big picture: how the various activities fit together and link to the big ideas.
Regularly raise students’ awareness of the nature of different aspects of quality learning.
Promote assessment as part of the learning process.

During the PL program we were encouraged to record conversations about learning we were having with our colleagues. We discovered that quality learning can look and sound very different. Becoming familiar with the principles (above) enabled me to reflect on my own teaching more deeply and with more focus. I began to pay more attention to the ways in which my practice, including my knowledge, skills, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, impacted my students’ learning.

Becoming more aware of the idea of articulating principles of teaching for quality learning catalysed a journey to unpack and investigate my own teaching through the lens of the principles. Mitchell’s principles have guided my decision making as a teacher and encouraged me to establish a classroom environment where my students are at the centre of the learning.

Despite ‘students being at the centre of learning’ becoming a vastly overused phrase, I purposely use it because I genuinely believe that my students must be part of their own learning. They are in the driver’s seat, I provide the petrol, the safety requirements, and the road map but ultimately they must be in control of their own learning. We would never let them get into the car on their own of course, our role is vital in their success. The teacher sits beside the driver on the journey alerting the student to different signposts along the way, encouraging and supporting the driver through many of the turns and twists before reaching a destination. I must be prepared to support each student as individuals on their own journey taking their own route. Anyway, enough of the analogies.

When I recognised that expertise in teaching was about effectively responding to changing needs and conditions, I began to see personal opportunities for professional learning and growth. I think the most important thing I have learnt about teaching is that I must keep learning; to be a teacher is to be a learner. I am not referring to the professional development that schools provide during staff meetings but the notion of professionally and personally pushing myself to learn new things about my practice; learning that will directly benefit me and my students.

For me, the difference between PL and professional development (PD) that I experience during staff meetings and Professional Learning Team meetings (PLT’s) is that the latter are decided by others. School leaders decide what matters for staff
learning and frame PD programs to attend to those ideas; often driven by policy or political agendas and/or mandates from above. These meetings are necessary for the school to function in an informed and consistent manner however the nature of that type of PD is in contrast to the PL I experience outside of these meetings – PL from which I have personally benefitted. Such PL has encouraged me to become an active learner, making decisions about what matters for my teaching and my own learning. Such PL has required me to take ownership of, and think more deeply about, my teaching. Understandably I know myself better than anyone else, I know what interests me the most, I know what problems I come across in teaching and the problems that my own students typically face. I am therefore in the best position to decide what I need to do to improve my teaching and develop quality learning – for me, that has meant researching my practice.

DEVELOPING DEEP UNDERSTANDINGS OF PEDAGOGY

The most recent PL I attended was titled Emerging Pedagogical Leaders (EPL). That program encouraged participants to record their conversations about teaching that they had with their colleagues (again the program’s intention was to position teachers as active decision makers and researchers of their own practice). EPL created conditions for learning that I would argue rarely exist in traditional teacher PD.

EPL encouraged us to develop our teacher voice. We were encouraged to respect the voice of others and ultimately an environment was created that felt safe and nurturing. Without knowing it at the time, such conditions enabled me to pay attention to what I thought mattered and I started to learn in a way that had meaning to me, personally.

I was fortunate to be teaching Grade 2 at the time and to be working with a colleague who was also attending EPL. We found that recording our conversations, our dialogue, about our teaching and our students’ learning was beneficial in numerous ways. We challenged ourselves and each other to think more deeply about our decisions as teachers; asking ourselves such questions as: “why did we do that” and, “why did we do it that way” and, “what will we do next,” and so on. Having such in-depth conversations about my everyday practice enabled me to take note of my decision making; sometimes recognising decisions I had made almost without consciously thinking about the given situation. (I highly recommend having such conversations with colleagues, taping them allows you to revisit them, sometimes hearing more things than you did the first time.)

This ‘talking about our pedagogical reasoning’ allowed me to get to know who I am as a teacher. I came to see that we make so many decisions and actions as teachers, but they are so strongly tacit; talking about the ‘what and why’ of my practice helped me to tap into my inner beliefs and values as a teacher. It helped me to value the voice of my colleagues and identify learning opportunities – opportunities that required research.
On one occasion, a recorded conversation with my colleagues resulted in identifying a need, or gap in our teaching and it became the catalyst for a research project taken on by our Level 2 team. Our conversation was based around teaching within an inquiry model (see Chapter 9 for more detail). We felt that our science lessons had become very student driven and we needed to take back the reins, if not for a short while, to explicitly model and ensure attention to a particular part of the science curriculum.

I think it is important to reflect on that role being enacted at different times in a lesson or unit of work. We discussed the importance of taking on the role of the dialogic/authoritarian teacher who encourages students to partake in a teacher led inquiry. We identified our teaching focus and recorded student engagement and learning. On this occasion we found a gap in the area of chemical science and decided to run a teacher led inquiry about food and the chemical affects they might have on people. Our students gained a lot from the week long experiment that required them to eat particular foods on each day and take note and record the perceived affect. Research projects do not have to be big, they can be simple as this was, what is important is to recognize that they enable us, and our students, to take an active role in the learning process.

This ‘experimenting with food’ experience has encouraged our team to reflect on our role within each new inquiry unit. We are now questioning the aspects of the unit that may require explicit teacher led learning, those aspects that we may need to facilitate but allow our students to drive, and how we position ourselves in the teaching-learning experiences we want to create. Through this process we talked our way into embracing teacher research.

Teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), or as some describe it, action research, can be defined as a collaborative process designed to identify a problem or an issue in your classroom with which you develop a plan for improvement by gathering knowledge and improving teacher practice. John Mason (2002) described the process of teachers researching practice as encompassing the act of noticing. Mason suggested that we cannot change the things we do not notice, but that we can take notice of things going on in our classrooms and choose to focus on one or two we think might benefit from change or investigation.

As I read more about researching classrooms from a teacher’s perspective, I came across an effective process to more formally ‘notice’ what was happening from which my teacher research was initiated. The PETAA paper by Marcelle Holliday (2015) Connecting Research and Practice, offered a plan that I found useful and successfully followed on several occasions; not just in our chemical science research. The plan entailed:

• identifying a problem or issue to be tackled;
• making a plan for action;
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- acting on the plan;
- observing what happens and collecting data; and,
- reflecting on the data and planning for future actions.

I most recently used this process (above) with my Grade 2 students because I became aware of the need to teach them scientific literacy skills such as challenging their own and others’ opinions, providing reasons for their opinions and respectfully considering the ideas and thoughts of others to enable effective classroom dialogue. There was a diverse range of student ability in my Grade 2 class when it came to communicating with others and I identified a whole class approach to speaking and listening as necessary.

I had already read and researched widely the area of student talk in the classroom and I knew that I really wanted my students to develop exploratory talk, that is, talk that helps students to reason with one another. During exploratory talk, students’ opinions need to be encouraged and valued, but the conditions need to be created for opinions to be justified and respectfully challenged.

While planning I took into consideration the teaching strategies I might try to pursue to follow this course of action, the resources, time frame and student data that would be important in shaping the pedagogical experiences.

I found a fantastic resource, a book titled *Talk Box* (Dawes & Sams, 2004) which described a program that, when I introduced it to my class, produced exploratory talk and reasoning amongst my students. The program was a 14 week program that provided 5 lessons designed to establish ground rules for talk and 11 lessons that allowed the students to practice thinking together. The program drew me back to principles of teaching for quality learning and the importance of creating conditions for quality learning to occur.

Due to the fact that ‘dialogue’ had been an area of interest for me over the last decade, I was aware of the suggestions and ideas that many researchers had made with regard to effective dialogue. However, as I followed the program suggested by Dawes and Sams (2004), I explicitly re-introduced the ground rules with my students and told them about the research we were all about to embark upon. My students were excited about the program and keen to hear about the improvements that they would make. I gathered the resources suggested in the book, most importantly the ‘Talk Box’ from IKEA, and began the lessons.

*Doing Teacher Research*

Over the next few weeks I observed what happened and collected data from my students. Each week the students were asked to complete a self-assessment known as a *Talk Diary* whereby they rated themselves on their speaking and listening immediately after the lesson. Dawes and Sams (2004) suggested ideas for formative assessments to be made along the way and I found myself adding these to my anecdotal notebook (and I have continued using these beyond the program).
The range of speaking and listening skills my students initially displayed was varied but mostly fairly low level responses were made such as one or two word replies and lots of statements that did not necessarily build on or connect with the other students’ line of conversation. By the end of the program I noticed a huge development in terms of the ease with which each group conducted their talks in contrast to the many disruptive arguments that had previously been present. Many student were able to use ‘exploratory talk’ that gave reason to their ideas and opinions, enabled them to clarify their own thinking, respectfully give consideration to their classmates’ thinking, and make group decisions.

Conducting this research opened my eyes to my students’ range of skills. It also confirmed for me the conditions for learning that are vital in creating an environment that feels ‘safe for all’ to speak up, to carefully but thoughtfully question and critique, and to experience positive learning experiences together. My students enjoyed being part of a research project about their own learning and were very excited to record their development over the weeks. They began to take notice of their own actions rather than just the actions of their classmates (of which students in Grade 2 are typically very good!)

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE MATTER

It may sound strange to hear that after years of great PL I felt in need of more. However, it was due to quality PL that I had begun to look more deeply into my own practice as a teacher, particularly in the area of science teaching. Interestingly, I caught the ‘research’ bug and I actually didn’t want to let it go.

Through my evolving researcher journey I have developed a pedagogy that I can now confidently describe as genuinely focused on the teaching and learning relationship and it is a pedagogy that I now truly believe in and one which my classroom hopefully genuinely reflects. This pedagogy revolves around a student centred classroom; where student dialogue is paramount in informing my teaching and assisting in developing my students’ learning.

As I stated earlier in the chapter, I realise that ‘student centred’ is becoming a bit of a catch phrase in education (as is dialogue), but when I use it, I mean a classroom where student learning is at the core. It is easy for such statements to simply be rhetoric, because all too often the curriculum, the concert, the upcoming class assembly or the mandated testing, can take over. So by the end of the week, students and what they think can simply have been pushed to one side; task completion or external compliance taking precedence to engagement in learning.

My PL and research experiences have combined to shape the way I work toward creating an environment that will support quality teaching and learning. I see that I play a crucial role in the development of my students’ learning and to do that well, I need to be a judicious listener.

Active listening on my part enables me to find out what my students already know (the prior knowledge they bring with them to the class) and what they need
to know. That means then as a teacher I need to be expert at acknowledging and responding to how they feel and conscious of that in which they are interested. I need to be sensitive to that which makes them feel anxious and be ready to respond appropriately to how they prefer to learn. If I approach my teaching in this way, then these all become new possibilities for me as a teacher researcher to explore on a regular basis. In so doing, I can ensure that I am purposefully pushing beyond the rhetoric of ‘student centred’ to better align my teaching intents with my teaching actions so that I am explicitly teaching for quality learning.

As a teacher I have been implicitly researching my way of teaching over the last 20 or so years but it is only in recent times that I have begun to acknowledge how important the role of teacher researcher is to me as a professional. Two years ago I began to feel disgruntled, for want of a better word, with my teaching and I realised that I needed more. But I didn’t really know what ‘more’ meant. Many colleagues suggested I take on another position of leadership and take a ‘break from the classroom’, change schools or change careers altogether. None of these ideas felt right. I knew I wanted to be a teacher and that I still had a lot to offer. After much deliberation and some in-depth conversations with a few of my mentors, I decided to take on formal study. I thought doing so might reignite my passion as a classroom teacher and assist me in achieving the sense of professional satisfaction I felt was missing. I did not start studying in order to ‘move onwards and upwards’, I started to study in order to stay put – I wanted to extend my career as a classroom teacher by doing something that would inspire me to hang in there and hopefully become a more informed and better teacher.

To quench my thirst for more, I chose to complete a Masters of Education by thesis. Undertaking a thesis gave me the opportunity to research what I was interested in and to do so in ways that would be applicable to my classroom. Fortunately, I became re-invigorated, but more importantly, I found I was able to transfer my new learning back into my school and most importantly into my classroom. My knowledge of, and practice in, teaching came to encompass so much more than just ‘doing teaching. I felt more informed, I felt more professional and I felt more articulate about the sophisticated business of teaching.

Undertaking study and being encouraged to consider my own classroom as a context for professional learning has led me to reconsider the important role of the teacher as researcher. Strangely, despite the fact that teachers work in an environment in which they are continually confronted by, and therefore need to manage, dilemmas in order to develop strategic and purposeful ways of addressing a diverse range of student learning needs, such professional expertise is not often captured in the research literature (or for that matter in the pronouncements of politicians and educational bureaucrats that speak in sound bites and seek simple solutions to complex problems). Hence, the teacher voice is largely missing from the very place it is most needed; the debate on quality in teaching and learning.

I am increasingly recognizing a divide between theoretical frameworks and the reality of practice, the disconnect between the outcomes of some research and the
knowledge of practice which teachers use to guide their teaching and which shapes their pedagogical reasoning.

Teacher research matters not only for teacher learning, development and growth, but ultimately for enhanced student learning. Teacher research encourages us to unpack our practice and our students’ learning. By becoming more knowledgeable about the complexity of the teaching-learning relationship, teachers’ professional knowledge of practice is more able to be better recognized, acknowledged, articulated and valued.

The importance of teacher voice has been highlighted through such projects as PEEL (Baird & Mitchell, 1986; Baird & Northfield, 1992), PAVOT (Loughran, Mitchell, & Mitchell, 2002) and EPL (Mitchell, Keast, Panizzon, & Mitchell, 2016). Such projects not only give credit to teachers, their ideas and findings but encourage teachers to become more knowledgeable about their actions and to develop clear beliefs about quality teaching and learning and what that entails. These projects bring the work of teachers to the foreground and illustrate that teaching is a complex job. When I read about how another teacher grapples with the same daily juggling act as that with which I am confronted, I tend to sit up and pay attention.

My research into teacher and student dialogue in the science classroom has enabled me to learn new things but to also identify many things that were present but to which I had previously not been focused on, or explicitly articulated for myself or others (France, 2017). By undertaking formal studies and through meaningful PL I have realised the rich resources that are present in my school – my colleagues. It is through more strategically supporting and tapping into that resource that I think productive educational change can be created. If that were the case, then perhaps we would see teaching become more highly valued both within and without the profession, and that would be a good outcome indeed.

CONCLUSION

Being a teacher researcher has had great benefits for my professional practice, and as a result benefits for my students. It has opened up many new doors for me as a professional. Firstly getting to know my colleagues better through developing action plans with them and talking to them about our philosophies about teaching and learning has been invigorating. I strongly believe that talking is the key; being required to justify decisions and actions really makes me consider my practice in new ways. I have come to see how having a colleague challenge my actions can help me to fine tune my practice. As a teacher I know that I must continually develop in order to deliver quality teaching and learning. I am grateful for the idea of recording teacher talks about teaching and learning. It is interesting to enter into a conversation in which the requirement is to explain a position and how that influences one’s practice.

Finding colleagues at work who are willing to talk about teaching and learning is so important. I cannot stress strongly enough how important effective dialogue
is in developing understandings of the complex nature of teaching. Just as dialogue amongst our students encourages higher levels of thinking, so too the same applies to teachers. I feel fortunate to work in a school where dialogue amongst teachers is given a high priority.

I see myself as a teacher researcher not because of my formal study but because I have begun to apply more scrutiny to, and more rigorously reflect upon, my own professional practice. As I read the literature I am constantly reminded of things I do not know but I also appreciate reading about other teachers, what they do, how and why, and how that influences my understandings of what I do know and why it matters. I became aware of the need for metacognition. My teaching has not only benefitted from engaging in more higher order thinking skills but I am now enjoying my ‘job’ much more.

Last year our school took part in a livestream with the astronaut Chris Hadfield and he spoke to our students about the need to identify what you are passionate about in life and then to follow your dreams. He suggested that students should take note for themselves next time they stepped into a library or book shop about what sections of interest they were drawn to: gardening; cooking; and so on. He then challenged the students to become an expert on something over the weekend. He encouraged them to ‘read up’ about a topic and challenge themselves to take note of this new knowledge – something they did not have previously.

Our students were greatly inspired by Commander Hadfield (as was I). His message resonated with me as a teacher. By reflecting on an area of teaching I have become passionate about (student talk in particular within a science setting), I began by purchasing books and reading more about the topic. I found that much of the research on this topic confirmed the good practices I already had but equally I found many, many new ideas to enhance my teaching. I enjoyed reading up on the theory behind why many things worked with my students and was then able to apply those learnings to my teaching to ensure I created an environment more conducive to quality learning. As a consequence, I began to love being a learner all over again and I have become more knowledgeable about one particular aspect of my work, and it has made a big difference to how I know feel about myself as a professional.

As I look back now on my period of being disgruntled, I recognise that it was a turning point for me and my teaching career. I am so glad that I did not leave the classroom. Instead I took time to take notice of how I was feeling and to do something about it.

I hope that this chapter highlights the importance for Education systems of the importance of providing stimuli and incentives to teachers to reignite their passion for teaching and challenge themselves to better understand what it means to teach for quality learning. Becoming a teacher researcher allowed me to grow and develop as a teacher but now I see that it is hard to be teacher without being a researcher. We need to find ways of supporting teachers in making that work more explicit, more meaningful and more applicable not only in their work, but also in their students’ learning.
REFERENCES


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11. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Engage: to get and keep (someone’s attention, interest, etc.), to hold the attention of; to occupy or attract attention. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Other terms for ‘engage’: capture, seize, grab or hold.

In this chapter I share the insights I have developed about ways to engage the attention of my students and entice their interest for learning. I invite you to think about your experiences and how well you are able to do this in your teaching. Take a moment to consider the following questions:

• Do you find it difficult to hold and maintain the attention of your students?
• Do you find they lose interest and their motivation wanes as you work throughout the day to attend to all areas of the curriculum?
• Do you notice how their thinking and their learning changes when they become disconnected?

In my early years of teaching, the term ‘student engagement’ was not commonly used and as a new and inexperienced teacher I thought that if I was able to keep students busy, working and looking productive, then I was doing a good job. As long as they were occupied and happy I thought I was teaching well. However, in time I realized that being busy wasn’t always leading to rich learning. As I thought about these questions and started to notice my teaching, I felt student engagement was a real challenge and this became a concern because I wanted my students to be active learners. I knew this meant more than just keeping them busy and I now know that quiet, busy work isn’t really an indicator that students are deeply engaged in their learning.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGEMENT FOR LEARNING

Over time student engagement has developed as a key idea in educational thinking, and for good reason, as it appears to have a significant bearing on motivation which, according to Bruner (1961), is a necessary precondition for learning. Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) highlighted that motivation promotes an interest in learning and enables students to develop confidence in their own abilities and attributes. More recently Ormrod (2013) confirmed that motivation points students in a particular direction and sustains their learning. Given that engagement is linked
to motivation which is intrinsic to learning, it seems reasonable then that teachers need to be creating classrooms where students feel motivated to fully engage in learning opportunities.

In Chapter seven my colleague, Suzette Quinn, refers to engagement as a hook that ignites passion and drives learning. I agree wholeheartedly with this analogy, engagement is about how we, as teachers, package student experience and entice learning. For this reason, engaging students in their learning is something I now think about a great deal, not just as one concept but as having identifiable parts that are interrelated and work together.

I think there are three key components of effective student engagement that are essential for learning: behavioural; emotional; and, cognitive engagement. I now understand more about how these three facets influence learning and I know that if my teaching successfully taps into each of these then I am better able to foster enthusiasm and motivation in my students. As a consequence, I also see a difference in the quality of my students’ learning.

As I began to focus my practice to attend to these areas I noticed that my students began to become more active learners, developing more inquiring minds and making choices to be the best learners they could be. Now I have developed approaches in my teaching that allow me to more effectively attend to these areas of engagement. I know my learners better than I ever have before, they have much to say and are very well informed because they access information from a range of sources including websites, television, blogs, personal experiences, expert opinions, magazines, etc. I think that such sources provide great opportunity to attract and hold their attention.

By using these sources and other strategies in my teaching I work to ensure they are enlivened learners and I am also able to attend to behavioural, cognitive and affective student engagement. I now feel as though I can better assist my students to make greater sense of the world around them.

ATTENDING TO BEHAVIOURAL ENGAGEMENT

A few years ago whilst doing some work with Jo Osler, a Learning Leader from the Catholic Education Office, I realised that behavioural engagement was something that could add real value to student learning. I knew I wanted to see a certain type of behaviour in the classroom and I instinctively knew this was about having all the students in my class engaged at the one time. Jo was able to assist me to see that engagement could be clearly defined by specific behaviours.

I came to identify these specific behaviours when my students were: persevering; taking advice; being attentive for extended time; challenging the ideas of others; and, appropriately using available resources. I knew these behaviours maximised their potential as learners and allowed them to connect in meaningful ways with learning. Jo helped me to bring these effective learning behaviours to the forefront of learning in my classroom. By working with her I was able to clearly identify and understand more about these behaviours.
As a result of that experience, I also began to work with students to list and define the things we do that help us to learn. My students came to recognise the specific learning skills that assisted them in their learning, such things as: focusing; listening; asking for help; moving on when they were stuck; clarifying by asking questions; and, sharing responses. In class now we use these ideas to frame our future learning intentions and to improve the quality of our learning.

These behaviours and the associated skills needed explicit teaching so I consistently modelled them and my students became quite practised at using them. I found that when my teaching explicitly identified, valued and attended to these learning behaviours in the classroom that it led to much greater student independence and motivation.

To continually promote these learning behaviours and skills, I created displays in my classrooms and students attached their photo or name to specific skills or vital behaviours when they noticed they were enacting these as they worked. We also used this information to set learning goals that enabled students to recognise their personal learning strengths and those of their classmates. It also became important to consider the culture of our classroom, in particular how, when and where we were working effectively to support the development of these effective learning behaviours. I began to reflect on my teaching and realised that my class could potentially be engaged all day if they developed the skills that allowed them to work independently in meaningful and appropriate ways.

I am now of the view that independence is an essential skill for all learning, and can also be built through behavioural engagement. Learners need to be able to solve problems, reflect and learn how to move on when they become “stuck.”

Developing behaviours around independent learning and problem solving is very satisfying for children. They feel grown up and capable if they can navigate the challenges and pitfalls of learning using their own repertoire of skills.

I have also learnt, from my personal professional experience, of some strategic ways that the associated skills may be taught. One really effective strategy, again originally derived by Osler and Flack (2008) is the use of Moving On Maps (see Figure 11.1).

Moving on Maps are visual diagrams that display a range of options which assist learners to decide how to move on when they are stuck. A powerful visual I often use with my students is a photo of a pig half stuck in mud. I use this as an analogy of being at a stand-still in learning; it asks, “Do you get out, stay stuck or fall back in?”

My experience tells me that allowing students to sit in the murkiness of uncertainty can be important for their learning. I use resources such as the Moving on Map, photos and slogans to promote independence and give students the opportunity to help themselves. As a result, I see my students referring to these resources or coming towards me and then realising they can go to a personal bank of skills first.

One of my colleagues has recreated a Moving on Map to suit her class. It has terminology and images that reflect what her students felt was important and what they could connect to. Tools such as this help to establish a learning culture
in the classroom where students are no longer reliant on the teacher to solve their problems. They learn to do it themselves and they like it!

To highlight the impact of student independence, consider the following illustration of how this might look in your classroom.

Imagine this – You’re starting a lesson and you give the instructions for the next task, all students seem to know what they’re going to be doing, you’ve scanned the group to notice any looks of disconnection, you’ve checked for any questions. None. All good. You send them off to begin the activity knowing that they can refer to the Moving on Map if they are unsure. You now have more time to attend to the needs of every student in the class not just those who used to run to you for help.

This type of approach using resources of this kind, has helped to build a culture of ownership in our classroom which has enabled students to become independent; they know what to do and what to do if they feel uncertain. I am now able to spend more time actively assessing and attending to the needs of my students. Building such independence is dependent on students being behaviourally engaged in learning. When students feel supported and safe this also enables teachers to work differently.

Another example of an effective learning behaviour is being active in class discussions. I had noticed that in class discussion the same two or three students were usually the ones most willing to speak up. They were always ready, always thinking – but it was really only three students. As I thought about this situation I began to ask myself what it was telling me. I began to ask: “Did all my students
know that participation in class discussion develops ideas and thinking and provides them with an opportunity to have a voice?"; “Could I be certain that quality thinking was occurring?”

On reflection, I also began to wonder if the class had the language to meaningfully participate in discussions. I decided to scaffold discussion with prompts so that they could learn how to contribute to class discussions. I introduced sentence stems so that students could use them as a way of entering into conversations – prompts included:

- I have a question …
- I noticed that …
- I wonder …
- I agree with … because …
- I can relate to that because …
- Another example is …
- What you said made me think …

It quickly became apparent that as students became more active in discussions it allowed them to test their ideas and thoughts, receive feedback and make connections with their peers. Becoming more comfortable with this behaviour taught them to take risks, build on learning and challenge one another.

It is now very clear to me that behavioural engagement helps bring learning to life because students are empowered and guided to understand what makes learning happen and it promotes their desire to learn.

When students begin to understand the learning behaviours and skills they need to build knowledge and understandings, they gain valuable insight about themselves as learners – information that is particularly useful when developed at an early age. Knowing what helps learning and conversely what impedes learning, allows individuals to continue their learning well beyond their classroom experiences – and that is clearly a good thing.

Developing the capacity to persist, question, clarify, practise skills, take risks and share ideas, has value in many ways, not least in setting a course for life-long learning. I now recognize, value and use these attributes myself as a learner.

ATTENDING TO AFFECTIVE OR EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT (MOODS, FEELINGS, ATTITUDES)

It is interesting how, as a consequence of working with the ideas around engagement, I have come to see and do different things in my teaching. I now see the importance of deliberately engaging students emotionally in their learning. I always wanted them to love learning and feel pride in their progress, but being deliberate about helping them make an emotional connection to learning has become something new for me.

While participating in Contemporary Approaches to Primary Science (CAPS) a professional learning program organised by the CEM (Catholic Education Melbourne), I learnt about the power of contentious statements. Contentious Statements
(see Chapter five for further information about the use of contentious statements) provoke students, they are often unexpected statements and they are designed to challenge existing ideas or beliefs. By being contentious in nature, these statements stir emotion and in turn, generate great thinking and promote powerful discussion.

In considering the value of attending to affective engagement I recognized the need for me to change my teaching, so a few years ago when I was working with my class on a unit of work around Sustainability, in the early stages of the unit I put up a statement to them that read: “Recycling is a waste of time.”

The shock on some of those little faces was a surprise even to me! Some said:

“You’re a teacher, you can’t say that.”

“Yeah it is because people don’t care. They throw their plastic bottles on the ground.”

Disgust, surprise, confusion, passion – the statement evoked a range of responses. Of course I had to explain that this was not my personal view but perhaps a view held by others. The students then became motivated to prove that statement right or wrong. That statement provoked emotion and motivation and combined with my invitation to students to question this idea inspired them into action.

Prompting affective or emotional student engagement requires teachers to know their students and know the content they must teach. The school I am currently teaching in is about six kilometres out of Melbourne’s CBD. At dusk, fruit bats fly over the students’ homes. I decided it would be appropriate to use this experience as an opportunity to explore the needs of fruit bats and the connections they have with other living things. At the beginning of this work, I presented the following contentious statement:

Fruit bats don’t need relationships with other things, only other fruit bats.

The students were instantly hooked! They’d seen the bats often and knew some of their behaviours. They were really keen to prove this statement wrong. Afterwards, I asked them why they had enjoyed this investigation so much and their comments included:

“The statement gave us a prompt.”

“It made *us* want to have a relationship with bats.”

“It made us curious.”

“The statement made us wonder.”

Presenting learning in this way, prompted the students to try to prove something; they were emotionally invested.

If you know your students well then creating the conditions that promote affective engagement can challenge their understandings of what they assume to be the norm, challenge their limited life experience and enable them to embark on deep learning. When we were studying the concept of Place, in particular the features of other countries, students were required to use the knowledge they had gained from
their studies to invent a new country which featured many of the structures we had investigated. I knew there needed to be more depth, more feeling injected into the unit. I showed a video clip entitled: ‘Bedrooms Around the World’. I deliberately gave a very vague introduction and explained that it would be an opportunity to see what children’s bedrooms looked like in different countries. The students nodded back casually in agreement and I played the video.

The air stilled. I had surprised them. The bedrooms varied from children living in squalor on dirt floors to the embellished room of a child pageant queen. The emotions ran high and fervent discussions ensured:

“How can children be allowed to live like this?”
“Who is letting this happen?”
“What can we do?”

And most interestingly:

“I think the girl with the crowns and all of the things in her room is the saddest.”

What followed was interesting. Many students included rules and laws in their invented countries that prohibited children from being victims of poverty or wealth. I could see outcomes of deep learning fostered by emotional engagement that were new and powerful.

One of my favourite experiences of student emotional engagement was during a Wellbeing unit when I wanted to give the class a unique taste of wellbeing. I bought each child a small plastic toy that looked like a monster. Their job was to look after their toy for the duration of the term and keep a diary of how well they looked after their monster. I had no idea how successful this was going to be or how strongly they would connect to the experience. Not only did they emotionally engage with this task, caring for the toys at home by feeding and bathing them, but they were also emotionally invested in looking after their charges. Some students even tried to retrieve them during a school fire drill!

When this level of emotional engagement occurs, it allows students to fully investigate their own potential. In this case, their feelings drove them to feel empathy and experience, something very new, and this created new learning. The motivation that came from emotional engagement provided opportunities for them to think diversely, be creative and learn in a much richer way.

ATTENDING TO COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT

As a teacher I believe it is my responsibility to engage my learners cognitively. I want to be confident that I am bringing them to new learning and it is also important that they see the progress they have made and the way their thinking has changed. As a consequence, finding ways to effectively track learning becomes important. Pre assessment tools are valuable for gathering prior knowledge and that information is essential in enabling me to see into the minds of my learners. Post assessment tools
offer ways of finding out what students have discovered over a unit and how their thinking had changed.

I recently collected data about the knowledge my students already had about the concept Relationships. Most of the information I received told me that they could all name friends and family as people with whom they had relationships and from this, I could also see what they didn’t know. The types of things they said in the pre-assessment about relationships were: mum; dad; sister; grandpa; pets; friends; brother. Carrying out a unit of work on Families seemed limited as they’d shown me they knew about these types of relationships. Only two students recorded non-human relationships – bees and bears.

I decided that to build new knowledge about relationships these ‘other relationship’ responses offered a way to go. So after further discussion together, we set out to explore different relationships, e.g., between other animals, relationships in the environment. The post-assessment revealed a dramatic change in thinking. The range of responses revealed they had come to see relationships in many contexts. They recognized relationships in contexts such as space, plants, water, football, God, personal learning, rainbows, dinosaurs, oceans and the sun. One student developed a most sophisticated interpretation of relationships, understanding that people and animals have dependence on one another, she also discovered that producers, consumers and decomposers have relationships with one another and that this was all linked to the role of the sun. Once again, new and challenging learning meant quality learning was to the fore.

For cognitive engagement to occur, I also find it important to allow students to choose their own area for inquiry when there’s opportunity to do so. This captures their thinking by providing a chance to consider what they want to investigate and allows ownership which encourages their desire to develop new understandings. This became clearly evident to me when I was concerned about a boy in my Grade 3 class. He often seemed to sit back while others told the class of the topics they wanted to investigate. He rarely shared and appeared to have trouble expressing his ideas, he seldom looked engaged. One day I spoke to him about the situation as I wanted to give him some prompts and help him to connect his hobbies or interests with our classroom work. I asked why it was tricky for him to pick something he’d like to learn about and he looked at me and said, “That’s not it. I wait to hear what everyone else is doing then I pick something completely different.”

So for the unit about Relationships he chose to explore relationships in the context of the periodic table of elements. I then realized that cognitive engagement is an individual learning experience.

When working to promote cognitive engagement with my students I constantly try to identify the specific thinking that I want to encourage. Noticing what my learners are saying as well as what they can and can’t do is helpful in guiding the answer to this question. I find thinking routines (Ritchhart, Palmer, Church, & Tishman, 2006) a fantastic way to engage students. Thinking routines are patterns of thinking which
can be applied to a wide range of contexts. And most importantly, they promote deep thinking.

Probing students’ thinking is also an effective way to engage their minds. Children often say things but not often enough are they required to explain or justify their thinking. I make this a priority in all curriculum areas and I find it is a valuable way to build new knowledge and provide students with an opportunity to develop deep thinking. A recent example of this was in my Grade 1/2 classroom based on a key question designed to cognitively engage students: “Can living things survive if they are not near water?” The students made all sorts of claims including:

“Turtles need to live near water because they lay their eggs in sand.”
“Camels don’t need to live near water because they can walk a long way to find it.”
“It depends on what animal it is.”

What they probably didn’t expect though was to have to then prove these claims. They had to go back and check what they’d said and provide evidence. After this, students had to reflect on the information gathered and decide what was ‘Fact’ or ‘Supposition’. I asked my students what they felt about the way they were encouraged to learn in our class, their comments included:

“It makes my brain smarter.”
“I feel connected to my learning.”
“I feel confident because my learning keeps building.”
“I wanted to say more in the discussions.”
“It makes me feel like a good learner.”

As a teacher, I always need to be attuned to what my students were saying. Now I find that I focus my teaching to provide learning experiences where prior knowledge is connected, where thoughts are translated to different contexts and where ideas can be opened up. This helps me to capture moments in time and turn them into stimulating learning experiences. Clarifying alternative conceptions is a great way to do this. For example, my students were required to consider if all plants needed water. A few students recorded:

“Plants needed water otherwise they would suffocate.”

Another student said:

“Yes because people, animals and plants all need to drink water.”

With my focus firmly on student learning, these responses provided great opportunities for future learning. Together as a class we looked at these two ideas and proceeded to develop some accuracy around these statements. Not only did it inform the class in the introduction of new terms and the science behind how a plant
takes up water, it was highly valuable for the students who initially wrote these responses. They were certainly cognitively stimulated and engaged.

CONCLUSION

So, has this chapter seized you, captivated and gripped you? Perhaps it has made you more aware of the impact of student engagement on the quality of learning.

Noticing how my students behave and respond to learning experiences has enabled me to recognise the skills they need to enhance the quality of their learning. Knowing that engaging them affectively offers a route to their feelings and that, in so doing, they become motivated to learn, has shown me that emotional connections bring a new richness to learning.

Learning how to notice, challenge and extend my students has encouraged us all to be much more daring and excited learners. I no longer need, or want, to be the source of my students’ motivation, now it comes from them. I think learning about what drives our students is what we as teachers need to focus on. After all, engagement is contagious.

So how do you engage your students in learning?

REFERENCES


Julie O’Donnell
Grade 1/2 composite class teacher
12. THE PRACTICE ROOM

A Space for Teachers to Engage in Professional Dialogue about Learning

INTRODUCTION

The current rhetoric around teaching often uses managerial language to describe what teachers do, implying that teaching is a technical or systematic activity where quality is evident in predictable routines and procedural approaches. When teaching is understood in this way the teacher simply becomes an implementer of a program (Adams & Engelmann, 1996; Slavin, 1996), yet any teacher will argue that this perception does not match the reality of their work. Teaching is far from a procedural task, it is incredibly complex and extremely problematic; approaches that work well one day may not work so well the next because every group of students brings with them specific learning needs and abilities so every classroom and every day presents specific challenges.

Teachers know that quality teaching is really about assisting students to develop deep and meaningful knowledge. Such aspirations require teachers to be constantly challenging student thinking, supporting students to develop the skills needed to effectively reflect on experiences and interpret information while also scaffolding students' language learning to facilitate new and increasingly complex language that enables self-expression. Teaching expertise is less about activities and more about a capacity to engage every student in a dynamic learning relationship (Lysaker, 2012). Rather than being technical, teaching is always a social practice that is essentially creative, extremely contextual and always relational (Souza, 2008). Quality learning expands a student’s sense of self and connectedness.

Developing quality learning and independent learners is challenging work and to do this well teachers need support that goes way beyond technical recipes for success. Teachers need to feel that their work is acknowledged; their expertise is recognised and their professional knowledge is valued. They need time and space to build this expertise and be supported in ways which enable them to identify and focus on the learning they think matters. Teachers need to find ways to talk about and explore this learning, in conditions where they feel safe to share their ideas and concerns. This type of support nurtures the person of the teacher and self-understanding of their role (Palmer, 2010).

Pollefeyt (2008) referred to such a learning space for students metaphorically as a ‘practice room’; an environment of trust in classrooms where students can grapple
with who they are and how they can be in the world. It is a term that frames my thinking in this chapter about how such a space can be equally important for teachers.

In a practice room teachers can experiment with unfinished ideas, rehearse these with others and continue to develop and refine professional practice, discovering who they are as teachers. In this space teachers can reflect on their students’ needs, explore complex ideas and try out the language they might use to engage their students. These conditions encourage them to share classroom experiences and student conversations and work together as colleagues to safely bounce around new strategies and adapt these to suit the contextual reality of their teaching.

This chapter is about a school that noticed the need to provide teachers with such a space and the time to think and work differently. It describes how these conditions produced a professional dialogue that impacted teacher thinking and framed student learning. It is a story from St Joseph’s ‘practice room.’

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

For some time, the school leadership at St Joseph’s primary school, the Principal, Deputy Principals and Curriculum Leaders, had been attempting to find ways to support teachers to enhance their planning and teaching of multi domain units. They believed it was important to enable teachers to develop their own conceptual understandings of the issues and big ideas within these units and build teacher capacity to determine how these ideas could be meaningfully linked with most curriculum areas. To achieve this, leadership implemented a procedural routine of regularly releasing teachers from their classroom teaching duties so that they would be able to work in collegial groups, i.e., teachers teaching same grade levels, and engage in shared dialogue focused on planning.

Guided dialogue sessions were also separately timetabled for teachers to address planning in Religious Education (RE) and these were facilitated by the school’s Religious Education Leader. These RE planning sessions were designed to support teachers to identify how the issues and big ideas in the multi domain units intersected with aspects of the Catholic Tradition. This had been an accepted approach to planning across the school and had been operating for a number of years. In her chapter in this book, Sharon Kenyon-Smith has captured from a leadership perspective, the story of the gradual development of this way of working and its impact over time.

In 2006, Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM), the sector’s governing body, actively began to prioritise a need to assist all Catholic schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese to clarify, articulate and develop an enhanced Catholic School Identity (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2014). Schools were encouraged to do so through reflecting on data gathered through a suite of survey instruments, first trialled in 2008.

The data raised significant system wide implications for approaches to student learning, planning and teacher professional learning (Religious Education Draft Curriculum Framework, 2016). This provided opportunity for St Joseph’s leadership team to further support their teachers through existing planning procedures to
find more effective ways to meaningfully situate Religious Education within unit teaching at each level in the school.

In response Multi Domain and Religious Education planning sessions were combined to replace the existing standalone planning sessions. The timing of the sessions would remain the same but these combined professional dialogue sessions became an ideal time to provide professional learning support for teachers as they began to reconsider their own understandings and professional practice in Religious Education. Through this structure, aspects of the Catholic Tradition became part of the overall dialogue within unit planning, allowing Religious Education to meaningfully intersect with everyday learning across all domains of learning.

THE CRITICAL FRIEND

Partnering the school in these professional dialogue sessions were Kathy Smith from Monash University and Rina Madden (the author) from CEM’s Religious Education team. Over several years, Kathy and I have been part of the evolution and shaping of this way of working and, as always in these sessions, our ongoing role aims to guide professional dialogue and allow teachers to enter the conversation whole heartedly and without fear of judgement.

Each of us brings a different perspective to the conversation; Kathy a science teaching and learning lens while I engage with religious thinking, in particular Catholic traditions. However, neither one of us are confined to speaking from within one perspective, we are both committed to being an equal partner in the conversation with teachers. In this way our role is more like that of a critical friend rather than a facilitator or external expert – a role usually adopted by those external to the school. We share an agreed acknowledgement that expertise resides within the school and with the teachers themselves and as a consequence our work supports teachers to value and draw from the professional knowledge they hold and use every day in their classroom.

Open ended questioning, deep listening and respectful challenge are key to the interactions that take place, as well as developing trusting relationships where risk taking is encouraged and promoted. As an active participant in these sessions over many years, I gain greater understanding about how teachers work to make sense of their practice and how they seek to clarify their role as teachers in a Catholic school.

TIME FOR LEARNING

To support teacher learning, the planning routines at St Joseph’s value and honour teachers with time to engage in structured professional dialogue. This sends a clear message that leadership supports and actively builds a school culture which embodies a learning community.

Planning with critical friends is scheduled twice per term involving Kathy and myself, a team of between 3 and 5 teachers who work together at a specific level
within the school, the Learning and Teaching leader and often the Multi-Domain Leader. The initial meeting takes place a few weeks into the start of term and another towards the end of term. This timing allows the conversation to have a different focus in each session.

The first session aims to provide teachers with time to unpack their own thinking about some of the big ideas underlying the concepts in the coming unit. It is also a chance for teachers to review student thinking as evident in work samples collected from the initial immersion activities in the unit. The second session in the term initially looks back on the unit overall and identifies the learning that has taken place. The teachers then begin to look forward in terms of possibilities for and connections with learning in the next unit.

In practice the dialogue is expansive and free-ranging, allowing teachers to explore and deepen their thinking. The duration of the sessions range between 60 to 90 minutes, allowing substantial time to engage deeply with conceptual understandings and student evidence. Sessions are a fluid mix of reflection through a range of lenses (Brookfield, 1995), including teachers as learners, student learners and theoretical research and literature.

TEACHER TALK LEADING TO POWERFUL LEARNING

To understand how these conditions impact teacher talk and ultimately teacher practice in ways which open opportunities for teachers to think and work differently, it is worth examining closely one professional dialogue session. The interactions in this session convey significant movements within the free flowing dialogue, the development of ideas and highlight the collegial support taking place. These conditions support learning because they promote the power of self-reflection and dialogue (Korsgaard, 2003).

The following statements are taken from a session where there were seven contributors to the dialogue: a group of four teachers from the junior level, the two critical friends, together with the Learning and Teaching coordinator of the school. The discussion revolved around unpacking the key concept of the unit about Place. The meeting was early in the term and the teachers had had some opportunity prior to the session to immerse students in the concept and to begin to gather evidence of students’ pre-existing knowledge in relation to the concept.

In reflecting on and analysing the session, I found the following elements stood out clearly as essential movements within the dialogue:

- Expanding conceptual understandings.
- Shaping and reshaping responses to deep and complex themes.
- Applying ‘practice room’ conditions to the classroom.
- Probing who I am and how I am as a teacher in a Catholic school.

While listed as four separate elements emerging from the dialogue, they do not exist as discreet stages in the dialogue, rather they emerge as movements within the
conversation which lead to ever deeper layers of meaning and understanding. These four elements highlight not only the deepening conceptual understandings which emerged but also the powerful self-reflection that takes place when teachers are provided with time and the supportive conditions of a ‘practice room.’

Through these conditions dialogue is grounded in an understanding that the teacher as learner and student as learner are inextricably linked. Evidence of student learning is positioned alongside teachers probing their own conceptual understandings. Teachers’ anecdotes of practice and their analysis of the learning they value, flows into and from their analysis of what this means for their students.

In the following sections underneath each of these four sub-headings are some selected statements from the dialogue which reveal the teacher thinking and learning associated with each idea.

*Expanding Conceptual Understandings*

The session begins with an open invitation by Kathy:

“Let’s tease apart the language of the concept. Also what are some of the challenges we faced when teaching it before ... What can ‘place’ actually mean?”

The teachers in turn then begin to unpack their thinking. They have brought with them some of their students’ initial thinking and there is an easy movement between referring to student thinking and that of their own thinking.

“It means state of mind … a place or an intangible situation.”

“This adds a level of complexity, the adverb you used … intangible, makes it more complex and we need to keep in mind how to break this open with Grade 2 students.”

“Is place a location, or does it have some other meaning?”

“If we understood the notion of placement … the action … how would that impact your understanding?”

“It links to creation, it could be about the act of creation … God placed us on the earth, like a causation …”

“We read Dr Seuss’ book, *Oh the Places You Go*. They got it better than I actually thought … it was one of those activities that cracked open their mindsets … some children could abstract that beyond location, beyond their own place and state now.”

“The word safe place kept coming through and that showed me where their mind set was.”

The above statements show the initial teacher thinking and how the dialogue addresses a variety of ideas that immediately broaden the concept. Teachers worked
together to identify links which may be powerful in helping students develop deeper understanding of the concept, as well as using a broad range of language that helps to clarify the multiple perspectives at play.

A guiding question focuses attention on eliciting deeper responses and identifying what is at work in both the concept and in the teacher’s role of shaping student understanding:

“What’s the difference you are identifying here? Any other ideas? ... How would that impact the understanding?”

Towards the end of the session, some of these conceptual understandings are revisited and some development of the concept is evident in the expanded ideas noted and the possibilities identified by teachers that indicate a deeper understanding or a new direction.

“You could choose where to place yourself, as in a mindset too …”

“This places the students as decision makers … What’s the critical thinking you need to do to make informed decisions?”

“As a Catholic we need the critical thinking skills, but we also need the belief …”

“How do you translate faith into everyday life, into the decisions you make every day?”

“What impacts on decision making … what values inform choices? So how do we together identify what we value? How does our tradition inform what we value … and therefore as a Catholic community to which we belong, what do we value?”

“The kids were showing that they thought they all did have choices … even the homeless!”

It’s important to note that the Catholic perspective is interwoven throughout the conversation and is not compartmentalized by the teachers. Statements and questions about aspects of the Catholic tradition occur throughout the conversation and links are made and teased out seamlessly alongside other philosophical perspectives such as science, sociology, economics or history. This interweaving has been enhanced through the ‘practice room’ space where conversation is allowed to flow without being interrupted by planning agendas.

The complexity of the ideas continues to grow as teachers have opportunities to grapple with the Catholic tradition and consider how this offers ways to both challenge and expand their personal understandings and that of their students. Engaging with their faith in this way also allows them to develop their religious knowledge base and their confidence to address religious issues that arise in discussion with students.
Helen Timperley, in her New Zealand study of teacher professional learning and development (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007) noted all interventions that developed teachers’ content knowledge also developed their understanding of pedagogy. It is through teacher exploration of the complexity of a concept or content area, that they become aware of the need to engage students in these complexities. Teachers are challenged to devise new and more engaging ways to give their students opportunities to grapple with the complexities and rigour of the content as they have come to understand it. In the following statements, this dual function is apparent. A leading question sets up a new train of thought for teachers:

“I want to pick up on understandings of habitats … this is a strong notion to delve into …”

“Habitats connects with the notion of uncertainty and vulnerability … if you ignore that connectedness, you miss the point of habitats.”

“One little boy said animals live where it suits them … this was well expressed and we developed this by drawing a Venn diagram.”

“It may be a good springboard to ask … do we all live where it suits us?”

“There were some really wrong statements that the students came up with. This is where the Claim-Evidence-Reasoning is a nice model to help them work through some of their claims about the relationship between animals and habitats.”

“The notion of diversity and creation and the notion of overabundance and diversity as necessary for growth might be good ideas to explore further.”

“Similar to The Lorax, The Dinosaurs and All That Rubbish is about putting the power into the student’s hands – the power to change. The story ended up being more powerful than I thought.”

In the above selected quotes the teachers are developing their ideas around responsibility and the environment through the conversation about habitats. They are seeing that there is far more to this concept than first meets the eye and this extends their thinking to how to engage students in the complexity.

Resources, teaching strategies and suggestions for where to go to next are shared and discussed, all the time remaining focused on highlighting and naming what is valued learning for students. The more explicitly the valued learning is named (e.g., “Putting power into the student’s hands”; “…this was well expressed and we drew a Venn diagram”), the more aligned the teachers become in their shared understanding of valued learning and how it is enacted across the school. Together the teachers shape the language around not only what is learned but also how it is learned at St Joseph’s.
R. MADDEN

*Shaping and Reshaping Responses to Deep and Complex Themes*

In the practice room teachers are free to reveal their wonderings and reflect on and question the way they respond to students. They are encouraged to respectfully interrogate each other’s thinking. In this way of working, in a collegial and supportive environment, it has become an expected part of professional practice at St Joseph’s to challenge each other and pose questions to enable colleagues to dig deeper into their own perceptions.

Occasionally dissonance is created which challenges underlying views about learning. The statements below show how teachers expressed unfinished ideas and questioned the impact teacher beliefs and thinking may have on their students.

“Do we complicate things for kids?”

“If it’s so diverse (the concepts), are we saying too much?”

“Are children more naturally giving than adults? Kids I think just want to give and help.”

“They have a voice.”

“My grade would challenge that thinking, they would be adamant that everyone has a choice .”

“What are other ways of knowing? … Is there only one truth? … How do we discuss other conceptions while honouring lenses others bring to the world and support them to make them fit with their beliefs and different ways of seeing the world?”

“Both in science and religion, humans are trying to understand place.”

“What is a Catholic concept of truth?”

“How to hold differing views in tension … Creation in particular … as opposed to the Big Bang?”

The other side of being ‘safe’ is that it does not have to be synonymous with being happy … we can be sad and safe at the same time … where the environment gives you permission to feel that … you don’t have to be in a happy place all the time.”

“We need to give everyone permission to be sad; if we don’t have the hope that goes with it, we can stay in a dark hole.”

Some of the dialogue begins to grapple with the deeper layers of religious understandings that intersect with the concept of place. Teachers question their own faith stance and begin to shape ways they attend to the Catholic perspective, exploring particular stories or elements from the tradition and how they may be used
to challenge student thinking. Teachers identify the power of their beliefs, exploring the subtle ways these influence their teaching.

By delving into powerful themes that are raised by the Catholic tradition, teachers broaden the scope of the concept and how they might engage students with them. The following statements are taken from across the dialogue as a whole.

“Sometimes metaphors are a powerful way to come to concepts.”

“The story (parable) of the woman with the coin, (the widow’s mite, Luke) … who gave more?”

“Where is the place at God’s table? What does it mean for students to have a place here?”

“We talk about images of heaven and God … what images of God are at play here?”

“The kingdom of God … might be interesting for the kids to look at that.”

“Metaphors for the kingdom are quite visionary and choices may be informed by the vision of the kingdom. What is shaping your vision for the world? If I were not the dominant species what would my vision for the world be? The issues of wiping out endangered species within their own environment come to the fore.”

“The book called God’s Paint Brush …explores God’s presence through the 5 senses.”

“These are wonderful images of God that move us away from the traditional man in the sky and opens up discussion with students.”

**Applying Practice Room Conditions to the Classroom**

When teachers experience a learning environment where they feel safe to share their classroom talk with their colleagues they become open to re-thinking their responses, integrating the theory of valued learning and how students learn within their everyday practice. In this way they prepare for improvisation and flexibility in their responses to students.

The following remarks highlight teachers’ awareness of establishing a practice room environment for students, where students are given opportunities to grapple with complex understandings, take risks and create new knowledge together. Here teachers are now seeing how the conditions of the practice room enable a shift in their own thinking and they see a need to create similar conditions to enhance learning in their classrooms. They show heightened awareness of their responsibility for creating a learning environment that can either open up or close down learning conversations with students.
“You can accidently, as someone educated in the 70s, come out with God as ‘He.’ … Sometimes as an adult you ruin the conversation … I know you are supposed to be taking it to the next level, but you have to be just so careful because they are precious conversations and they can be ruined in a second.”

“Can’t take for granted that you have created the conditions for that kind of conversation and this is the norm … you need to keep the space open for multiple perspectives and multiple images of God.”

“Why do you think Catholics choose to believe God created the world?’ … I kept asking them [students] and they started to say it’s so that we can treasure the things on earth and we’ve got a responsibility because God created it … It is a tricky thing isn’t it? What do you think? How do I respond? I was happy about that as a conversation.”

Here teachers are naming dialogic models for learning experienced in the practice room space and demonstrated in the classroom: using questions to prompt and probe; to share ideas; and, seek alternative viewpoints (Fisher, 2009). The above examples demonstrate teachers’ awareness of the fragility of the dialogue space and sensitivity to how they position themselves in the dialogue vis a vis their students (Dillen, 2011).

Probing Who I Am as a Teacher: Understanding My Professional Identity

The practice room space allows teachers to reframe and better understand their professional identity. This is demonstrated by the statements below as the teachers rethink their role and stance as a science teacher, religion teacher, history teacher, literacy teacher, to name just a few of their roles. This space allows them to test how to balance these priorities, discern what influences their thinking and their decisions, find what motivates them and come to a sense of their own identity as a teacher in a Catholic school.

The statements below reveal depth of self-awareness and self-reflexivity which is the hallmark of high quality professional practice (Brookfield, 1995, 1998). The following remarks show teachers finding ways to articulate innate beliefs and values. In sharing these openly with each other, they are testing and putting their ideas forward for evaluation entrusting their thinking to the team and re-appraising their identity as teachers. This dialogue shifts thinking subtly and is dependent on trusting relationships between colleagues where the deeper questions about the relationship between identity, beliefs and teaching can be explored.

“What culture do we want in the classroom? Passive acceptance? Does this serve me? Does this give me life? We want to foster the uncertainty … It’s part of learning and life.”

“Put on your ‘perspective specs’ to expand possibilities for thinking and new expectations.”
“It’s a privilege to be a teacher and listen to the students’ stories.”

“As a Catholic, we hope that our beliefs would influence our decision-making?”

“The sense of community … children can find power in a community which all shares the same drive.”

Through the space, time and professional support embodied in the practice room, particular professional strengths are identified and named. These then become visible markers that are present in the culture of learning at St Joseph’s: shared ownership; shared understandings; and, a shared vision for learning. This supports new teachers as they are inducted into the school’s culture of learning, ensuring it is reinforced and transparent, while at the same time attending to the ongoing professional and personal growth and development of all teachers.

By the explicit naming of professional skills and expertise, the complexity of the teaching profession is acknowledged. Teachers bring their expertise to contribute to the intellectual rigour and high expectations of the culture of learning at the school. It models a learning community in action.

“The context shapes our teaching … what are the skills and attributes we need to strategically work on? Perhaps the context shapes what we decide we need to work on.”

“Often when we teach we think of what kids need that we need to develop. On the flip side, what do they already have that we need to continue to highlight and nurture?”

“Our expertise as teachers comes in because we make decisions about how to talk with kids about this stuff.”

“You’ve created the conditions where such conversation is the norm.”

“I want them to be making links and connections.”

“We sometimes assume they are making links … your expertise comes into play where you make the links visible. Again your expertise comes into play in the way you weave this together.”

“You have to make decisions about the environment you are comfortable to be working in as a professional. How comfortable are you talking about Creation and the Big Bang theory and holding them in tension?”

WHAT DO I CONTINUE TO LEARN IN THE PRACTICE ROOM WITH TEACHERS?

As a partner in the learning conversations in the practice room space at St Joseph’s, I have been struck by teachers’ honest and rigorous self-examination of their practice. I continue to be amazed by the power of dialogue and its ability to transform the
very basis of self-understanding, with the smallest of interchanges (Boeve, 2003; Burggraeve, 2003). I am humbled by the honesty of the search for truth that lies at the heart of these conversations and at the depth of the exploration.

Each professional learning conversation provides opportunity for developing personal faith understandings, but more importantly I have come to appreciate the diversity of faith positions within the Catholic tradition and the possibilities for ongoing interpretation of the tradition with future generations (Dillen, 2007). I am heartened by the experience of professional dialogue which models a dialogical approach to religious education expressed in the CEM renewed Religious Education curriculum framework documents currently in draft (REsource RE Curriculum Framework).

I have been challenged by some who consider the use of a critical friend in the practice space as a dependency model. At what point, they ask, do teachers conduct their own dialogue without an external partner? Teachers are frequently engaged in deep dialogue resulting in powerful learning. This happens incidentally over lunch, with students in the classroom, in discussion while planning with colleagues. But the practice space has a particular focus on the teacher as learner in dialogue with colleagues. It intentionally challenges and talks to professional identity, it aims to broaden conceptual understanding and professional skills and its strength lies in leading teachers to consider perspectives and insights from beyond the school culture. Openness to the other ensures the school learning culture remains dynamic and outward facing.

Dialogue is itself a theory of learning (Freire, 1998); one which seeks to empower and transform the learner through giving them a voice in their learning and collaboratively creating new knowledge. In moving towards dialogical learning, St Joseph’s invests in time and support for teachers to inquire into their own practice and experience conditions for dialogue that transfer to the classroom.

Changing underlying views about learning and teaching is a challenge and the learning processes involved are necessarily complex (Timperley, Parr, & Bertaines, 2009). There is no simple answer to creating a culture of learning, but one principle that stands out as critical for success is to create learning conditions for teachers that are as closely aligned as possible to the learning conditions valued for students. In creating the conditions for dialogue, St Joseph’s is building a dialogical, reflective learning culture.

CONCLUSION

The current technical rhetoric that defines teaching undermines the expertise teachers need to promote rich and meaningful student learning. Within this context it is challenging for schools to create, or even see a need to, create a safe and supportive space where teachers can engage in dialogue to develop their professional knowledge. Yet amidst this prevailing educational rhetoric the leadership team at St Joseph’s primary school has not only valued such conditions for teacher growth but actively worked to find ways to provide a space where teachers are supported to engage in dialogue; dialogue that enabled them to:
THE PRACTICE ROOM

- reflect on and identify valued learning in practice;
- come to deeper understanding of the complex nature of the relationship between learning and teaching; and,
- uncover tacit teacher beliefs and understandings and identify the impact of these on student learning.

The space created to support teacher professional dialogue emerges from both the school and CEM’s shared vision for high quality education in a Catholic context. This vision finds expression in a dialogical pedagogy where the flourishing of each person is the goal.

Structuring the work place with a dialogical foundation is evidence of the school’s strategic investment in their teachers as both people and professionals. It remains an experimental and developing space which is subject to ongoing evaluation and critical analysis by school leadership to ensure alignment with the vision for quality learning is maintained. It is a space that remains under pressure from the competing priorities of educational trends that continually fluctuate over time, trends that seek to disenfranchise teachers from debates about quality learning and which seek to reduce the skills of teachers to that which is systematic and procedural.

What is most empowering about the work at St Joseph’s is that when engaging in a practice room space, teachers demonstrate a capacity to articulate considered and purposeful pedagogical decisions that develop conditions for learning that nurture the skills, knowledge and attitudes they believe really matter for their students. At the same time generating new points of contact with the Catholic tradition as a way of clarifying the important questions and issues that arise for teachers and students.

At St Joseph’s, teachers have the opportunity to learn through dialogue in a safe environment, creating these same conditions to support their students’ learning. The rich professional dialogue between teachers leads to rich classroom learning. At St Joseph’s all learners matter!

NOTES

1 See Chapter 6 for a detailed explanation of Multi-Domain.
2 Immersion activities (see Chapter 6) are used at the beginning of a unit to determine each student’s existing knowledge of a key concept or idea. These may involve students viewing a YouTube clip or responding to a picture story book, or discussing a news item that relates to the key concept. Student reflections from this immersion are gathered and brought to the dialogue session as evidence of pre-existing knowledge.

REFERENCES

R. MADDEN


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13. RISK IS POSITIVE

INTRODUCTION

Is the title of this chapter a contentious statement? Perhaps. Either way the response, for me is largely emotional, and divulgés more about how and why I think about risk as opposed to the definition per se. Whenever the word risk is passed around in conversation it is quite often interpreted as being negative. It is a term frequently used and acted upon in a student’s learning development, but how is it acted upon by a teacher? Do we ever associate our professional learning with risk? Just as we ask students to take risks so too, I would argue, we should put ourselves in a position where the end product may not be known and we are forced to challenge our current thinking.

It is in this unknown place of pushing the boundaries and taking risks that I think I am involved in what I like to call ‘threshold teaching’. Threshold teaching is the place where I am challenged, unsure of the result and forced to think critically about the situation. Threshold teaching helps me to ask more about the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of what I learn rather than the ‘what’. In this way, I feel as though I am actively working to advance quality teaching. So how do I recognise what it is that I need to learn through threshold teaching?

An important aspect of being a professional is being aware of one’s practice in real time. That means being able to recognise and articulate the knowledge, skills and ability that underpin pedagogical expertise. It requires being consciously open to change and emotionally cognizant of, and sensitive to, teaching and learning situations and experiences. Threshold teaching then is about accepting the challenge of learning through practice as an action. In so doing, quality in teaching and learning can be discerned.

This chapter sets out to explore the nature of risk and how insights into practice from such examination influence and shape the teacher as a whole person, thus making it clear what it means to be a teacher learner.

COUNTING THE BENEFITS OF RISK

Teachers often invite students to take risks, not only academically but also socially and emotionally. Risk taking can be confronting but being confronted by a challenge, taking a risk in teaching and learning should not be perceived as negative.

Pedagogical risk taking needs a positive environment, one in which scaffolding is readily available. Two important factors for such scaffolding include trust and
communication. In the first instance, teachers need to be surrounded by a supportive team when they challenge the status-quo of their teaching, for students the same applies for their learning.

A risk taking initiative we provided our students with involved the opportunity for them to become the teachers of their own learning. Our students were asked (in groups) to research and present a lesson of their choice (within the concept being covered) to a target audience of students they preferred at any level from Foundation (first year of primary school) to Grade 6 (last year of primary school).

As a team, we decided to take the risk of creating a unique and dynamic learning experience that would challenge both students and teachers. Trust and communication were crucial to success. Trust can take many forms. For instance, teachers, needed to trust their belief that ‘to teach something requires learning it carefully’; a belief based on their own pedagogical reasoning when reflecting on their own planning for teaching.

Given the nature of the risk-taking experience being initiated, a sense of trust was also needed from both the parents and school leadership; a trust that was based on the view that the experience was of educational benefit to students.

The value of the project was in learning more about learning and how that can influence teaching and understanding of one’s own practice in particular. Both students and teachers gained powerful insights into their thinking and how to respond to some of the challenges that emerged through that learning. For example, within our teaching team we each faced different challenges. Some had concerns about loss of control, others were unsure about what it meant to teach something when there was no prescribed ‘knowledge’ outcome.

As a team, we discussed from the outset that critical feedback was crucial and that it needed to be framed in a professional and positive manner. As Rockoff (2011) noted, the subjective evaluations professionals give one another hold great value and build teacher effectiveness.

Although the experience was different for each teacher, and rightly so, it was greatly valued and supported by the team. The experience was therefore important for our learning and highlighted to us how, more and more these days, the expectations on teachers revolve around the need to show ‘student progress’, which then acts as a proxy for effective teaching. The danger that such an ever increasing shadow of compliance casts over a teacher can mean it is easier to prioritise outcomes over learning. In such a case, it is not difficult to see how that can lead to a decline in teachers empathising with students as the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of learning is overshadowed by the ‘what’ of the intended result.

Taking the risk (briefly outlined above) brought the how and why back into full view, for us, our school leadership, our students and their parents.

ZOOMING IN: RECOGNISING CHALLENGE

The difference between boredom and anxiety is what has been described as our Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, Vygotsky & Rieber, 1988). The ZPD is the place
where we learn best. It is in the ZPD where self-worth and productivity is, for most, at its zenith. It is where the how and why of my learning progresses. Yet how do I know if I am progressing in the right direction? Who assesses my responses when I am confronted with a contentious statement?

Just like students, teachers each have their own ZPD. What we know and how we respond to challenges differ and as a result, is personalised. Therefore, through threshold teaching, my learning development is different to that of another teacher. To explain that a little further, I offer the following vignette drawn from my teaching experience.

My Teaching: A Vignette of Practice

After the initial years as a teacher when concepts became more familiar and practice became somewhat common, it could have been very easy for me to plateau and remain in a ‘comfortable’ teacher style for the rest of my career. The comfort zone – competent enough to handle and manipulate any classroom learning to the liking of the teacher without any involvement of risk – has its pitfalls. Comfort teaching is the antithesis of threshold teaching. I think most teachers have fallen victim to delivering the same material and structure from previous years under the guise that, even though the next year’s class will be different, a teacher can manipulate it so it works; works for me that is. Where in this ideology is the student? How does this approach to teaching increase the educational capacity of the student? Does it not slow down our own learning? Our professional learning should be in dynamic harmony – building and challenging. A teaching career should not become stagnant. Professional Learning is about working on that harmony. Recognising challenge calls us to be humble and cast aside ego.

An example of challenge, a crucial element of threshold teaching that I faced in my early years of teaching, was physical classroom layout, i.e., how the furniture was used and positioned within the learning space. To begin with, the old adage of one table and chair per child weighed heavily on how I saw the physical set up of the learning space and it prevented me from seeing a different perspective. I was stuck in a singular view. Challenging that view required asking if students would still learn if the learning environment was different? That question was quickly answered.

At a school in which I worked many years ago, I was informed when I started that half the students would not have a tables or chairs. This left me both surprised and confused, not to mention anxious about how I would implement quality teaching. I was confronted by something unfamiliar – and definitely pushed outside of my comfort zone. My view of the physical set up of a learning environment was under threat.
In this instance I could not resort to structuring classrooms as in previous years and I was forced to rethink the issue. As a result I needed to learn to implement something I did not know about before this time. It left me unsure as to what the outcome might be. As a teacher I knew how to deliver the curriculum, but in a space in which my familiarity was questioned, it challenged my capability to foster a positive learning environment.

It is this moment that I see myself involved in threshold teaching – it creates the opportunity to shift my thinking, my prior knowledge and teaching style. The core of what I know now is confronted as I am forced to address the how. So where does the support come from?

Recognition that I needed help and to make a shift in my thinking about pedagogy was the first step in facing the challenge. My professional learning need was different to other staff; it was personal. My professional learning required growth in ways that others more familiar with the given environment of the school did not. Reaching out for support from colleagues, having discussions and performing observations helped to facilitate my learning. More importantly, it helped me recognize and name what I sought in my practice through responding to my professional learning needs.

Although generally colleagues can help with professional critique through observations and discussions, it was the teachers that supported and worked directly with me on a daily basis that provided the vital feedback to help regulate my growth. Added to this is another significant factor. For risk taking to be meaningful, I think that school leaders need to be seen to be humble and able to recognize their own learning development publicly – it empowers those around them to perform in a similar fashion.

Likewise, at the personal level there is a need to make the effort to view your teaching in light of the practice of others. However, it should not framed as some form of jousting match of ego with a winner and a loser, but an opportunity for professional growth. Observing others’ teach can be confronting and eye opening but should never be viewed as a competition; it offers a personal point of challenge. It is another way of personalising one’s own professional learning and informing understandings of quality in teaching and learning. All of this helped me in my challenge to learn through working in a learning environment that was considerably different to that which I had previously been ‘familiar and comfortable’.

DOES ONE SIZE DOES FIT ALL?

If I were to say I teach mathematics it would be subjective but that I teach a student to add two digit numbers is objective. The latter has a result and a definite outcome. I am using a set of skills acquired from experience or explicitly taught from experts about
how to add two numbers effectively. Teaching mathematics however is subjective. Being in the threshold teaching zone asks me to consider whether I am merely following a set of steps to achieve an outcome or utilizing my prior knowledge to support thinking and learning and to make conceptual connections. An example of this distinction is in the use of pre and post tasks in Mathematics. These tasks may be open ended or have questions with some degree of ambiguity, as evident in Figure 13.1.

![Figure 13.1. Open ended mathematics task](image)

Accepting risk is part of challenge. Using activities that challenge (such as that described in Figure 13.1) leads to greater development in problem solving and thinking and asks students to really flesh out their knowledge and skills in order to find a solution. Mathematics in real life is not always black and white; although it can appear that way to students through school mathematics. But as a teacher I want to see my students’ thinking, if the foundation blocks have been set in place, what can they do with them?

When first faced tasks such as in Figure 13.1, most students are initially anxious. This type of question is not as straight forward as it may seem and does not quickly align with a strategy or algorithm so commonly the main focus of school mathematics. Therefore, as a teacher, using this type of task can be risky. It may lead to blank sheets of paper and foster a dislike for mathematics. So why do it? The completed sheets may return completely empty or with vast amounts of random answers in the hope that something is correct. Yet from a different perspective, the problem creates opportunity for insight to students’ thinking.

When first given, I have no idea how my students will respond. Even an empty sheet can be informative. The students may simply shade part of the table and feel as though they have adequately answered the question (see sample test 1 in Figure 13.2). If so, it prompts me to ask questions such as: “Did they understand the questions?”; “Are other factors involved?”; or, “Should I formulate the questions in
Regardless, the information received asks me to think more deeply and reflect on my teaching as well as giving me greater insight to their learning.

But what about the student? What have they learnt from such an exercise? Along with everything else in teaching, scaffolding is vital. Dealing with emotions that may impact on future learning is a key factor to ensuring it is done carefully and most importantly in a positive manner. In this case, although students may not be aware of it, they are starting to unravel that something.
In my experience, most often if I were to ask a student to complete a division sum it would be something simple like $10 \div 2 = 5$. But does this show me they understand division as a concept or that they are progressing with their learning? Does it highlight multiplication as the inverse of division? Does it offer evidence of fact families? Fractions? Decimals? Division when the answer is unknown? The variables are many.

Some would argue it shows me a learned skill or known fact, nothing that would indicate how they learn. It reports what they have learned rather than the how or the why. Those aspects require questions such as: “How does this picture relate to division?” or, “Does it look like a multiplication array? If so, can I make a connection?” and, “Are fractions considered to be division?”

Through risk it is my hope that students begin to question, reflect and think more deeply about their learning and what division actually means. Finding the how or why takes far more time to answer than the what. This means as a teacher I have to adapt and become dynamic in my approach to teaching, not least because students will be at different stages in their reflections on their learning. The more they reflect, the more connections they make. The same applies to me.

At the end of a mathematical unit I see value in giving students a post-task exactly the same as the pre-task. Typically the idea is to see what they have learnt. But what if the student still answers the questions in a similar fashion as in the pre task? If I asked the same question twice with swift regulatory, the same if not similar response would be given, so why should I be worried if it happens in a task? Time is often the issue. We expect students to change their thinking over time but this does not always happen in a curriculum timeframe. More often than not, scaffolding of conceptual understanding is the issue, i.e. building the connections to other areas in Mathematics. Do I as a teacher transfer these skills?

*The Demands of Accountability and Compliance*

Testing in school is more and more linked to issues of accountability and ‘student progression’. If students do not show that some learning has taken place questions about the nature of the teaching are likely to be raised. But shifts in thinking aren’t always immediate. Standalone tasks shouldn’t be seen to account for how students learn, nor be used to infer supposed ‘teacher effectiveness’.

The problem with compliance and accountability as a measure of teaching effectiveness is that it doesn’t place overt value on my understanding of how a student learns and feels about learning, yet the more I know about it, the more it influences my teaching. Knowing how they feel about learning engenders empathy and triggers emotional intelligence - which can be often undervalued in education. Yet emotions are visceral and influence not only the way we think about, but also how we do our teaching (Rajammal, 2016). The same applies to students’ learning and I would argue that we need to find ways to be conscious of their feelings, to understand them and work with them in order to better support them in their learning.
Taking risks has no end point. There is no person to meet at the finish. It is unique and individual. It is a continual journey of improvement. I often ask, “Is my teaching changing? If so, how do I know I’m changing for the better? Am I taking risks to make that change?”

For me, taking risks is important because it helps to keep me actively thinking about learning. It encourages me to concentrate on metacognition (i.e., thinking about thinking) that is too easily overlooked or pushed to the subconscious when caught up in the busyness of teaching. Metacognition is questioning what I am doing when teaching, reflecting how my practice affects student learning and seeking to better understand how students are responding to the activities and tasks I set them. Risk taking and placing myself in the threshold teaching zone encourages an attitude of openness to the situation and to see teaching and learning in a symbiotic relationship. It ultimately fosters greater sensitivity and awareness, all of which inform my practice and, hopefully, positively influences the ways in which I work to enhance student learning.

Teaching is evolutionary, proactive and dynamic and so inevitably centres on change. Embracing change is a positive aspect of taking risks. It may be easy to point out what needs to be done, it is another matter to do something about it. Risk involves change, change involves action and ultimately it is up to me to take that action. Doing so requires me to take control and place myself firmly in the threshold teaching space, to take charge and set challenges where the outcome may well be unknown. Taking risk is an action, therefore I have an active role to play. It is not a strategy or a skill, rather a decisive choice about shaping one’s values; both professional and personal.

As a teacher I have learnt that my teaching has to be fearless and without reservation. In my experience, too many students appear to fear the unknown, the wrong answer, the idea that may come from left field, the thought that no one dares say. Contentious statements (as described in Chapter 5) are but one method to mitigate this challenge and compel students to take action. Do we need a contentious statement to compel change in our teaching? Take a risk without fear of repercussions? If schooling itself allows fear of the unknown to prevail, then, in most cases, it will follow our students into their adult life.

My teaching needs to constantly embrace risk, not fear it. My practice must model for students and that I support them to take risks with their learning. I need to empathise with students and feel what it is like to be the learner. Teacher as learner is a two way experience. It is completing the cycle of teaching through which pedagogic acts influence learning and learning similarly influences teaching: the pedagogical relationship, the heart of expertise (Loughran, 2010). This is where I believe quality in teaching and learning exists. As a professional I need to always ask myself, “Am I taking risks, or is my teaching at risk?”
REFERENCES


Eckhart Philipp
Grade 4 teacher
Teachers who actively cultivate new kinds of smart for both themselves and their students have demonstrated dramatic successes with teaching the diversity of students for whom they have responsibility … professional learning [that supports the development of such smarts] requires active cognitive, emotional, and practical engagement from teachers.

(Timperley, 2011, pp. xvii–xviii)

An enduring issue associated with educational change is related to the tension between the individualism of teaching and the social nature of learning. That tension exists in two ways for teachers. The first is that the development of pedagogical expertise is typically viewed as an outcome of learning from experience about classroom teaching. Generally, that learning is from reflection on experiences in which the ‘data’ from trialling and experimenting with practice is developed, collected and analysed by the individual teacher in relation to their own work. Inevitably then, it can be difficult to reframe (Schön, 1983) situations beyond the individual teacher’s perspective. The second is that alternative perspectives as a consequence of questioning, probing, reflection and critique through social situations tend to lead to a greater diversity of views. The social aspect of learning may therefore create new opportunities for development and growth that might not be so likely when working alone.

In terms of teachers’ professional learning, the opportunities derived of going beyond the individual matter because, through a whole school approach to learning and teaching, a shared vision of development, action and practice becomes possible. Through such a whole school approach, educational change can then be realized.

In the chapters that comprise this book, that whole school approach is powerfully illustrated. In so doing, the outcomes of the authors’ professional learning become both tangible and meaningful. This chapter considers some of those outcomes in order to explicate some of the learnings that form the foundations of professional learning that matters.

A SHARED LANGUAGE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

As Kathy Smith outlined in Chapter 4, her role as a leader of professional learning in the school revolved around creating conditions for learning; conditions that reflected
the respect for, and value of, teachers’ professional knowledge of practice. She worked with the teachers in such a way as to make the individual learning from their own classroom experiences explicit and clear for themselves and their colleagues. To do so required developing a shared language of learning and teaching, a language that carried meaning and was in effect, an insight into the way teachers’ professional knowledge is about both ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’.

As the authors of this book continually illustrate, their language of learning and teaching (which included such things as: throughlines; multi-domain; big ideas; prior knowledge; metacognition; guided inquiry; immersion; key understandings; contentious statements; sharing intellectual control; critical friend; teacher research; and so much more) is an aspect of their professional learning that is clear and strong. However, beyond the obvious value of a shared language and therefore the common understandings underpinning the associated concepts, another important aspect of the value of that language stands out. In all cases, what a shared language also supported was a shift in thinking about teaching from ‘activities that work’ (Appleton, 2002) to the pedagogical reasoning (Shafto, Goodman, & Griffiths, 2014) underpinning a teacher’s practice. That shift is crucial to developing much deeper understandings of learning and teaching because it encourages questioning the ‘why’ of practice.

By exploring pedagogical reasoning, teachers begin to engage with learning and teaching at a level that leads to differentiating between important aspects of pedagogy. For example, through a cursory glance into a classroom one might assume that students that appear to be busy, active and excited are engaged in learning. However, on closer examination it may become apparent that they are simply having fun and enjoying doing a task. I am not suggesting there is anything wrong with enjoyable activities but, the point is that there is a major difference between having fun and being engaged in learning. The teacher who questions practice in such a way as to unpack the ‘why’ of teaching is more likely to organise, structure and conduct pedagogical experiences in which genuine engagement in learning is the intended outcome. In many ways, the aim of engagement in learning is encouraged through the use of a language of learning and teaching because it encourages one to think about why something is organised in a particular way and how it might lead to the anticipated learning outcomes. Hence, the purpose of activities needs to be clear and strong so that being busy, or having fun, does not become a proxy for engagement in learning.

Taking that point a little further, consider for example the strength of pedagogical reasoning bound up in the purposeful use of prior knowledge. As so many authors in this book have illustrated, they deliberately seek to uncover students’ views and understandings of situations by inviting them to share their prior knowledge. In so doing, they aim to help students articulate what they already know (and in some cases feel – thoughtfully tapping into the affective domain), in order to create ways of helping them link their existing knowledge with new knowledge. In making such links (another term that carries particular meaning in the language of learning
and teaching used by these teachers), the idea of building knowledge up and, in some instances, creating cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), is designed with a pedagogical purpose in mind. The use of a shared language of learning and teaching then fosters development of pedagogical reasoning as it becomes an initiator for reflection on practice and a way of sharing understandings of practice in ways that make sense for themselves and others.

REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

The notion of reflection carries particular significance in teaching. However, as noted above, a shared language (and therefore shared meaning) matters in learning and teaching. Dewey (1933) described reflection as:

… always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance. Reflective thinking, in short, means judgment suspended during further inquiry; and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful. … To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry – these are the essential of thinking. (p. 13)

What reflection means then is the ability to recognize (and be confronted by) a problem ('problem' though is not meant to carry negative connotations, it is about something that causes one to stop and think again), examine the problem from different perspectives, consider alternative ways of bringing evidence to bear on working through the varying aspects of the problem and to purposefully develop ways of responding to the problem that might begin to address the situation. Having done so, there is then a need to ‘test’ the approach to addressing the problem – the results of which may well lead to further reflection.

Reflection involves the ability to frame and reframe situations (Schön, 1983). Through the process of seeing situations from different perspectives (reframing), a teacher’s learning from experience informs their practice as they develop deeper understandings about what is happening pedagogically, how and why. It is through that level of learning from reflection on experience that expertise develops, and it is why reflection is so important for professional learning. Something that has been a crucial aspect of the conditions for learning at St Joseph’s Primary School.

Sitting alongside the importance of reflection is the way teaching itself is conceptualized and understood. Teaching isn’t training. Teaching is an educative process which demands a lot of the teacher in order to manage the dilemmas, issues, needs and concerns that abound in a classroom of learners on a daily basis. Teaching is problematic (as per Dewey’s notion of a ‘problem’ being something curious, interesting or enticing). It is in the problematic that the complexity of teaching becomes clear and why it is that teaching is sophisticated business (Loughran, 2010).
The decision making associated with managing the problematic nature of teaching; being able to recognize, respond and evaluate actions in relation to that which might be needed for a diversity of learners (at the same time), is a challenge. That is why reflection, or more specifically, learning from reflection on experience, is so deeply embedded in the development of teachers' professional knowledge. It is also why professional learning matters in not only creating, but also supporting and leading quality in learning and teaching and why recognizing that teachers are learners is important to how teachers and teaching itself are positioned.

TEACHER AS LEARNER

Sadly, the archetype of teaching often tends to be the image of the individual teacher standing in front of a class of students, telling them that which has been deemed to be important for them to know. In many ways, that ‘stand and deliver’ image, creates an impression that telling and teaching are the same thing. Therefore, teaching as transmission, or the banking model as Freire (1972) so aptly described it, can dominate views of teaching and lead to perceptions of practice that are unhelpful and misleading. For example, when a view of telling as teaching dominates, subject matter knowledge too easily becomes confused with expertise; a view that flies in the face of the well-established arguments around Shulman’s (1986, 1987) notion of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK).

As research has consistently demonstrated, PCK offers a concrete example of the high order of pedagogical expertise and development essential for transforming subject matter knowledge for learning in a given field of content (Berry, Loughran, & van Driel, 2008; Bullough, 2001; Gess-Newsome, 1999, 2015; Marks, 1990). As teachers develop their PCK they, begin to understand more deeply the types of issues associated with learning that content and how that influences the ways in which they might need to assist students in coming to grips with the conceptual understandings at the heart of the content.

Through PCK, teaching moves well beyond the transmission of subject matter as facts and information alone. A teacher’s PCK is enmeshed in a range of crucial ideas and practices (i.e., the big ideas of the content, aspects of that content that are difficult to learn – and why, misconceptions about the content, ways of ascertaining student understanding, contextual knowledge that influences learning of the subject, and so on – see for example the use of CoRes as explained in Hume & Berry, 2011; Loughran, Berry, & Mulhall, 2012), all of which draw attention to teaching as complex and sophisticated business – the antithesis of telling as teaching.

Another unfortunate aspect of the telling as teaching perspective of practice is associated with the false separation of teaching from learning – almost as if they are distinct activities rather than understanding them as existing in a dynamic relationship together. One outcome of this separation of teaching and learning is highlighted by the adage that a teacher may have delivered the information but the students didn’t learn it. However, the expert teacher understands learning and teaching as being in a
dynamic relationship (the essence of pedagogy), such that teaching should influence learning and learning should influence teaching. It is a feedback loop through which practice is increasingly informed, refined, developed and strengthened. If teaching is seen as a one way process, then learning about, from and through, practice will inevitably be severely diminished.

As suggested in the previous section of this chapter, reflection on experience is a crucial aspect of learning and is central to the ways in which teachers develop their professional knowledge of teaching. Therefore, understanding the teacher as a learner hints again at the sophisticated nature of teaching and the type of attitude, or stance, necessary to pursue pedagogical development in ways that will genuinely inform practice.

Jeff Northfield, as an experienced educational researcher and teacher educator, made clear how a teacher as learner stance embodied what it meant for him to learn about teaching through teaching. In his return to teaching documented in the book *Opening the classroom door* (Loughran & Northfield, 1996), Northfield illustrated how teachers are continually collecting and analysing data from their classrooms as they seek to better understand their practice and their students’ learning. Although they may not always be seeking to use that data in a formal research sense in terms of being a teacher researcher (see for example Chapter 10 in this volume), they are working in ways that ensure their decisions and actions are responsive to their pedagogical situation.

As teachers work to develop the nature of their classroom environment, they are continually learning more and more through the different types of data they collect (e.g., observations, students’ reactions, level of engagement, etc.) about their practice and how it influences their students’ learning. The chapters in Section 2 of this book are examples of how such data, analysis and learning can begin to be formalised for sharing with others. However, just because that level of documentation, explanation and dissemination is not a normal expectation of teachers, does not mean that teachers’ day to day undocumented actions and practices are no less apparent or important. In fact, it is through those daily processes that a teacher as learner stance is recognizable and draws attention to the ways in which pedagogical expertise is continually being constructed, developed, reviewed and refined – none of which is so obvious if a view of telling as teaching prevails.

The teacher as learner is a powerful way of challenging superficial views of teachers and teaching and is certainly what the authors of this book have made clear in the experiences documented in their chapters.

CONCLUSION

The insights into learning and teaching shared by the teachers in this book is in no small part as a consequence of a thoughtful approach to professional learning that was overtly developed, supported and sustained by school leadership. There is little doubt that without appropriate direction, support and encouragement from leaders,
that a school could inadvertently send an implicit message to students, parents and teachers, that teachers are solely responsible for their teaching and, as a consequence, their students’ learning. In contrast to that, this book illustrates how a whole-school approach to learning and teaching can be developed, and in so doing, not only break down the individualism and isolation of teaching but also create a collective vision for ongoing development and a shared understanding of learning and teaching that infuses all aspects of school life.

The chapters in this book are a reminder of what it means to not only examine learning and teaching but to also document and share that learning with others. Amongst an impressive list of important ‘learnings’ that Northfield documented as a result of his research into his return to teaching was that ‘quality learning requires learner consent’ (Loughran & Northfield, 1996, p. 124). That statement is a reminder that learning cannot be mandated, and it is an idea that is clearly to the fore in the work of the teachers at St Joseph’s Primary School.

In order to support students to become willing, active and responsible learners, teachers need to continually be working to develop quality in the teaching-learning relationship (the very essence of pedagogy itself). That requires much more than telling as teaching and will be far less likely if development is structured as working on teachers (as per traditional professional development) rather than with teachers (as per notions of professional learning).

The work of the teachers documented in the chapters of this book makes clear what can be achieved when learning and teaching are understood as existing in a dynamic relationship. Their studies into their practice and their students’ learning highlight what is possible when documenting, articulating and sharing of pedagogical expertise is at the heart of development, and when professional learning (with all that that signifies) is constructed, supported and nourished by leadership that values teachers and teaching in ways that are clear and explicit. Through such a whole school approach, these teachers have ‘cultivate[d] a new kind of smart for themselves and their students’ and under those conditions, expert teachers flourish and responsible learners prosper and thrive.

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Kristin Baynton is an international teacher from Barrie, Ontario Canada. She completed her Bachelor of Education at Lakehead University and shortly after graduating and becoming a primary teacher moved to Australia. She is currently working as a Foundation Teacher at St Joseph’s School in Hawthorn, Victoria. Kristin participated in the 2015 Contemporary Approaches to Primary Science (CAPS) professional learning program which helped to shape her philosophy of teaching science in a junior classroom.

Rikki Borg worked as a classroom teacher and school leader for many years over three different schools in Melbourne. He presently works as a Learning Consultant (Literacy), designing and implementing professional learning for Catholic Education Melbourne out of the Western Region Office. His teaching experience spans Grades 1-6 over 13 years and he worked at St Joseph’s for 7 years, where he shaped his career through profound professional learning. He has held leadership roles in the areas of Curriculum, Mathematics, English and Multi Domain. He has a keen interest in building teacher capacity in pedagogy, teacher content knowledge and the use of data.

Andrea Dineen has been teaching in Catholic schools for twenty-four years. She has worked in both primary and secondary school settings in a variety of roles including classroom teacher, Maths Intervention teacher, Mathematics Leader, Individual Differences Leader, Learning and Teaching Leader and Deputy Principal. Whilst working as a Mathematics Consultant in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, Andrea completed her PhD (graduating in 2015) in the area of Mathematics Education. She has a particular interest in working with teachers to target learning to meet the explicit needs of students.

Victoria Dounis is an experienced primary teacher currently teaching Year 3 at St Joseph’s School. Her 25 years in teaching has also seen her working as Deputy Principal and in Student Wellbeing and Reading Recovery roles. Victoria completed her Masters of Education in Inclusive Wellbeing at Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. In her studies she explored key theoretical perspectives and current research in wellbeing in inclusive schooling which offered strategies for integrating the learning into practice in Catholic school communities. Her work explored environmental focused approaches which addressed relevant policy frameworks, school culture, pedagogy and teacher attitudes, relationship-building, strategic planning and links with school improvement processes.
Elisha Elliott studied at the Australian Catholic University, and has since taught across all stages of the primary years in Canberra, Melbourne and the United Kingdom. She is passionate about all areas of the curriculum and has worked in various leadership roles including Arts Leader, Religious Education Coordinator and Senior Team Leader of Grades 5 & 6. Elisha is currently co-teaching in Grade 6 at St Joseph’s Primary School (Hawthorn), in an open planned contemporary learning space. She has worked at St Joseph’s for the past 12 years, and now balances a busy family life whilst working part-time. Elisha’s diverse experience in a variety of schools with students from different backgrounds has given her solid teaching foundations and skills in behaviour management, cross curricular and inquiry based learning. She is committed to ongoing professional learning and development and for the past three years has been mentored by a team of education experts as part of a professional learning program called Contemporary Approaches to Primary Science (CAPS).

Ann France is an experienced primary teacher. She is currently undertaking a Masters of Education at Monash University. Her thesis explores the importance of dialogue in the construction of scientific understanding in the junior primary classroom. Ann has always had an interest in the power of classroom talk and its ability to enable deep-level thinking within her students. Ann has greatly benefited from taking part in a range professional learning programs where the conditions for learning placed great emphasis on teacher voice and research. These experiences have inspired her to go further with her own learning and research. Her other research interests include: conditions for learning; teacher pedagogical reasoning; and, science education.

Mary Howard has been a classroom teacher for more than 40 years within the Catholic System. Her passion for primary science teaching was stimulated further by her participation in the 2007 Science Teaching and Learning (STAL) program facilitated by the Science team at Monash University. Mary was a co-author with other staff from Our Lady of Good Counsel Primary School in a book of science activity reflections. Scientific Literacy then became a focus for the school and a further publication in 2011 led to Mary’s enjoyment in recording her teaching experience and personal learning. Becoming part of the Contemporary Approaches to Primary Science (CAPS) program led to her involvement as a facilitator within the program. She now shares her experience as a science mentor with teaching staff in other schools. Mary became the science leader at St Joseph’s Hawthorn in 2010 and has established an Immersion Centre to stimulate science inquiry and learning across the school. Her work assists classroom teachers to build their confidence and capacity to incorporate science concepts into many areas of the curriculum. As science leader and mentor at St Joseph’s the Leadership Team recognised her work and nominated her for the Australian Prime Minister’s Award (2013) for Primary Science Teachers.
Belinda Jackson is currently working as a Foundation teacher at St Joseph’s Primary School, Hawthorn. She has been involved in ongoing professional learning opportunities that have assisted in developing and building teacher capacity, in the area of inquiry and science. She has a breadth of experience across contexts having taught in London and in rural Darwin in northern Australia.

Gilbert Keisler has been a Principal of Catholic Parish Primary Schools for the past eighteen years. During this time he has led his staff in the development of initiatives and innovations in the areas of Mathematics, Science, Learning and Teaching and Religious Education. Gilbert’s vision is to strategically lead school communities to improve student learning outcomes through developing teacher capacity. He has inspired teachers and students to be effective learners in order to best understand, participate and contribute positively to their world.

Sharon Kenyon-Smith is the Deputy Principal at St Joseph’s Primary School, Hawthorn. Sharon is passionate about education and has spent the last 36 years focused on improving learning and teaching so that students can experience high quality education. As an educator she has built experience from many different perspectives – classroom teacher, physical education teacher, curriculum leader, individual needs leader, acting principal and literacy leader. Sharon’s Master of Education from the University of Melbourne inspired her to design programs for gifted children and meet the individual needs of learners. Her thirst for learning is kept alive by the complexity of the teaching and learning process and the desire to improve education for all students.

Simon Lindsay is the Manager of Improved Learning Outcomes, Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM). Catholic Education Melbourne represents the sixth-largest education system in Australia, operating in the third-largest Catholic diocese in the world. Simon has led change in education across 331 schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne through a relentless focus on the impact of teacher learning on student outcomes.

John Loughran is a Sir John Monash Distinguished Professor and Executive Dean of the Faculty of Education, Monash University. John was a high school science teacher for a decade before embarking on a career in Teacher Education. His research interests include Science Teaching and Learning, Teachers’ Professional Knowledge and Teacher Research. He has written a number of books including What Expert Teachers Do (Routledge/Allen & Unwin), Developing Science Teachers’ Pedagogical Content knowledge (Sense publishers), and Opening the Classroom Door (Falmer Press). He was the lead editor of the latest International Handbook of Teacher Education (Springer press) and was the co-founding editor of the international journal Studying Teacher Education.
**Rina Madden** works as an education officer in Religious Education with Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM). Her role includes: project work renewing the Religious Education curriculum framework for primary and secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne; contributing to key strategic documentation for CEM; and, school based consultancy with a focus on professional dialogue around Religious Education. Rina is currently undertaking a PhD in theology at Catholic Theological College (University of Divinity, Melbourne) exploring teacher beliefs about student spirituality and its impact on teacher pedagogy. Rina is an experienced primary teacher with research interests in children’s spirituality, Catholic identity and pedagogy.

**Julie O’Donnell** is a classroom teacher at St Joseph’s Primary School, Hawthorn. She has been teaching for 25 years and has been involved in many aspects of primary education. Her various roles have included Deputy Principal, Religious Education Leader (REL), Curriculum Leader and Mathematics Leader. Alongside these roles, Julie has continually developed her passion for teaching and uses her experience to shape her vision of quality learning. In particular, she has been involved in Action Research projects and Professional Learning that explores how students use dialogue, how they think and how they make sense of the scientific world.

**Eckhart Philipp** is a teacher at St Joseph’s School in Hawthorn, Melbourne. He is also a Religious Education Leader and works as a Parish Liaison between the school, parish and local community.

**Suzette Quinn** works as a teacher at St Joseph’s Primary school, Hawthorn. Suzette as a qualified Special Education Teacher, completed her Masters in 1998 with a focus on Educational Psychology. Suzette participated in the Emerging Pedagogical Leaders program in 2013 and 2014, an initiative run jointly by Monash University and Catholic Education, Melbourne.

**Kathy Smith** is Senior Lecturer at Monash University. She has expertise in primary science education and a particular research interest in teacher professional learning and the conditions that build teachers’ capacity for self-directed learning. Kathy began her career as a primary teacher and worked in this role for over nine years before broadening her work across other areas of education. In recent years, while working as an Independent Education Consultant, Kathy worked with State Government Education Departments in projects related to Science Education and teacher professional learning. Her ongoing 8-year consultative role with Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM) saw her assisting with the development and implementation of a sector wide Science Education Strategy for the Melbourne Archdiocese and developing and facilitating a range of teacher professional learning programs in science education. Kathy continues to work with and learn from teachers in schools.
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