

## Leading Schools in a Data-Rich World - Lorna Earl:

"Wisdom will come from pushing ourselves beyond our comfort zone," said Associate Professor Lorna Earl during her Keynote Address yesterday. Speaking about leading schools in a data-rich world, Lorna argued that the age of accountability has brought a change in the relevance of data. Lorna invited guests on a journey to the past, before the age of accountability: "Remember the days when people assumed that school leaders knew what they were talking about, they had a right and a responsibility to make decisions about schools."

Over the last decade, institutions have come under pressure, she said. "We are not prepared to live with the 'doctor knows best'... we don't know the community as we once did, we don't know our students, we don't know the will of the community." Lorna also discussed how people have lost confidence in their schools, because they are not receiving the information they are "hungry" for.

She challenged principals to ask themselves why they feel uncomfortable about data. She told of how a journalist had asked her why schools refused to talk to the press. The journalist could come up with only two reasons – perhaps that information the school withheld was too damning or that they did not have enough information to answer the questions.

Lorna said there was much anxiety about data, with many taking the attitude that "not knowing things means you don't know it". Putting it simply, she said: "Data will always be there – get used to it." Principals and teachers just need to learn how to use data to their advantage, she said. But she warned there was no set formula. Lorna compared using data to painting - if you know how to use it and what to look for, you can paint your own picture and pass it onto your audience.

She said educational leaders must "develop an inquiry habit of mind, become data literate, and create a culture of inquiry". It's all about "wanting to know even when knowing is contrary to your belief", she said. Professionals must reserve judgment and tolerate ambiguity by "listening to those you hope to silence... (by) taking the risk that they may change your mind".

Just as importantly, she stressed professionals must view data with a healthy amount of scepticism. "We need to know about what the numbers mean. The interpretation is the most important part."

- The world has moved into the Age of Accountability. Previously, society had a naïve trust in people and organisations to produce the results. Now, there is a focus on accountability and testing and auditing. Previously, school leaders lived in a state of innocence of *aporia* (not knowing what we didn't know). Now, we have moved to feeling victimised - "they don't trust us any more". Decisions were made based on the intimate knowledge of people and things. Now, that is no longer the case. All systems now include centralised accountability systems to try to get large scale reform. Why? because the profession has failed to implement the required reforms.
- Accounting = gathering, organising and reporting information that describes performance. It is about auditing and demonstrating how much value has been added.
- Accountability = the conversation about what the information means and how it fits with everything else that we know and about how to use it to make positive changes. It is about working towards building relationships and trust with our stakeholders and to keep the activity moving forward.

- We need to learn to live with data.
- The consequences of using data in high-stakes decisions include:
  - focus on education - a positive effect.
  - awareness of problems - a positive effect.
  - identification of areas of concern - curriculum, geographical, professional - a positive effect.
  - maybe a narrowing of the goals of the curriculum - a negative effect.
  - using testing as teaching strategies - a negative effect.
  - CYA activities in the school - a negative effect. (If you don't know what CYA stands for it's cover your a\*\*\*)
- Learn to live with data and like it. People can suffer from data anxiety. But it can move people from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation (or the other way as well). It can move people from a feeling of surveillance to being willing to work towards improvement.
- Using data is not a mechanistic process. It is more observation skills, imagination, visioning, deciding what to do and how to do it. In other words, it is more like what an artist does.
- The capacities that leaders in a data-rich world need include:
  - an inquiry habit of mind - valuing deep understanding, reserving judgment, having tolerance for ambiguity, taking a range of perspectives, and systematically posing increasingly focused questions. Wanting to know even when the knowing will challenge our beliefs. Taking the risk that those who know might change our own views through data and information.
  - data literacy - thinking about purpose, recognising sound and unsound data, knowing statistical measurement concepts, making interpretation paramount, and paying attention to reporting and to audiences. Validity is now more about whether the interpretation of the result is reasonable and fair - knowing what the test tests.
  - a culture of inquiry - involving others in interpreting and engaging with the data, stimulating an internal sense of urgency, making time, and using critical friends.
- Making data fun involves:
  - having humanity, humility, humour.
  - realising that there is lots to learn from data.
  - getting to know your experts.
  - sharing the load.
  - [understanding the paradox of hope.](http://aspa.asn.au/images/conferences/aspa/2001/earlparadoxofhope.doc)  
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