Teacher Learning Circles:
reading theory in practice through dialogue

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The Context of the pilot: The Buckland project

Objectives

- Funding from William Buckland Foundation for a two year project focusing on participation in the City Centre program
- Outreach fellow to adopt mentor coaching role with teachers in eight schools in Neighbourhood Renewal areas
- Prepare Year 9 students for participation in the City Centre
- Focus on community engagement through action research
- Work within the Neighbourhood Renewal framework
- Transform Year 9 curriculum in line with key MYRAD recommendations for engaged learning with stronger community connections
- Support for schools that are particularly low Socio-economic status i.e. LSG 8-9
Problematizing the objectives

- **One size does not fit all**
  Schools are autonomous organisations that have their own organisational culture and curriculum.

- **The crowded curriculum**
  Many teachers already feel they are asked to do too much. Project assumes that school is ready for reform.

- **Whole School reform**
  Change at year 9 means whole school change. Change happens from within the school and has to be directed by the school community.

- **Professional Learning**
  Research suggests that teachers need to keep abreast of new ideas about student learning and effective strategies for enhancing that learning.

- **School and Community**
  The school fence is a symbol of exclusion - keeps kids in and the community out.
Outreach: An intervention with subtle footprints

- Rolling up the sleeves and helping out – classroom engagement modelling best practice
- Encourage a sense of enquiry – teachers as learners and researchers
- Facilitate community engagement – make the local contacts, provide the focus i.e. action research in the community
- Support the development of professional learning teams
- Devise program for Professional Leave

Build a community of learning
George Otero argues learning communities are built by ‘promoting and practising dialogue’

Relational learning → cognitive development
“To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.”

(Bakhtin, The dialogical imagination 1981)

**How does dialogue contribute to conceptual understanding and learning in general?**

**Thinking**      **Writing**      **Reading**      **Scaffolding Learning**

“Different kinds of dialogue are required in the classroom”

(Cheyne and Turalli)
David Bohm argues that Dialogue is not debate. It’s not about winning an argument but rather:

- Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding
- In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.
- In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view
- Dialogue reveals assumptions for re-evaluation.
- Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change
- Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position

Paolo Freire argued that dialogue is the key to consciousness raising.
Dialogic Literacy Circles in Spain - a case study

- Dialogue around ‘classic’ literature for literacy & learning
- Significant outcomes in Literacy development for adults with little formal education
- Grassroots activism around adult learning and community participation
- Disengaged school students benefit from dialogic circle
- The first DLC’s established by FACEPA who fostered
  - Democratic participation of participants in decision making
  - Collaborative projects with other European Countries
  - Conferences
  - Declaration of the rights of adults to have access to learning
  - Actively building community engagement in disadvantaged areas
Seven Principles of the Dialogic Literary Circles

- Egalitarian Dialogue
- Solidarity
- Equality of difference
- Making of Meaning
- Transformation
- Instrumental Dimension (skills)
- Cultural Intelligence

“Even if you are the best academic person you can’t know everything”
Juan: long-term participant DLC

The principles outlined in the DLC’s are based on the theories of people such as Habermas, Freire, Bohm, Bahktin and Buber. Dialogue is relational and transformative.
The way circles work – the participants view

- Everyone always sits in a circle
- There can be 25-30 people or only 10
- The group generally meets once a week
- All the participants are involved in choosing the book. The book has to be classical or classic literature.
- Everyone understands the seven dialogic principles which are explained at the outset
- They invite comments from other people
- The comments can be about the characters, the ideas, the story, how it is written…whatever interests the person
- The main emphasis is that people express opinions and explore ideas.
- People in the group take turns to read out the piece they like.
- There are no right or wrong opinions but facts can be verified.
- Always have to respect ideas. No fighting over one idea.
- People take turns to speak
The Role of the Facilitator:

1. The facilitator is an equal participant

2. They have to believe that they want to share not impose

3. The facilitator must believe that everyone will learn together after exchanging experience and opinions

4. The facilitator may offer an opinion or make suggestions about suitable books to read.

5. The facilitator makes sure that everyone who wants to make a comment has the opportunity to do so.

6. The facilitator must try and make sure that everyone takes turns, that everyone is heard and listened to.

7. The facilitator can gently steer the conversation and provide direction.
Assumptions:

- Teachers are human and enjoy social interaction
- Teachers are learners
- Teachers have extensive experience in the classroom
- All teaching practice is based on theory (even if not explicitly stated)
- Theory can improve practice
- Most teachers don’t read a lot of educational theory post teacher training.
- Dialogue facilitates the process of reading.
Key principles of TLC for Professional Learning

1. Build "community" with other learners
2. Construct knowledge through reflecting on personal experience.
3. Connect knowledge through reading and discussing educational theory
4. Support other learners in their reflective practices
5. Enhance professional voice
6. Collaborate diverse teaching practices
7. Transform classroom practice
The TLC process

- Fortnightly gatherings of 2 hrs with teachers and cluster educators from five different schools.
- The selected readings, ‘classical’ literature for educators, provided an overview of issues related to engaging middle years learners, namely:
  - Year 9 as a critical year
  - Teaching thinking skills and dispositions
  - Approaches to enhancing learning in the middle years
  - Learning Communities
  - Individual Learning
  - Experiential Learning
  - Adult Learning Principles
  - Whole school reform
Reflections on the process

- Cross school communication was viewed very positively by participants – the LSG synergy was strong.
- Teachers were very happy to tell anecdotes about the classroom and student behaviour rather than analyse learning.
- The purpose of the dialogue had to be constantly reinforced – i.e. relating discussion back to the ideas of the text.
- Teachers became more articulate as time went on, and as they trusted each other much more.
- The facilitator has to sustain conversation around the text.
- The readings need to be selected by the facilitator in the short term.
- Sustaining a two hour dialogue around a text can be hard work!
- Perseverence furthers! Deep connected learning happens.
Outcome of TLC pilot

*It’s been the best professional development activity we’ve had in years. It gave the younger teachers the opportunity to talk about educational theory, and it gave us all more confidence to say what we know. Even though I haven’t been able to come to all of them I’ve read all the readings and talked to the others. It’s a terrific process*”

Year 9 PLT leader, Hillcrest Secondary College

- Participants stayed with the process throughout the year
- Many referred back to the readings in revising programs.
- Several participants conducted discussions back at the school.
- Some took on curriculum leadership positions.
- All said they had used ideas from the readings to promote change at the school.
- All participants very active in effecting change in their school
1. Professional Learning for teachers at the city centre (an LSF initiative) – action research, journals, facilitated dialogue, readings.

2. Trainee teacher learning programs being piloted adopting action research principles

3. Beyond the Classroom Professional Learning Program (an LSF initiative) currently being piloted. Attempts to mirror the City Centre model in school communities.
   Train the trainer model to be rolled out in 2008
For further information

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