

FUTURE AS A LEARNER ESSAY

Looking In Through the Out Door: Creating purpose and a positive culture in schools

I live and work with my family in an international community, which is defined by change. This change exists simply because of the transient nature of our staff and students. Every change - usually as a new academic year dawns - brings with it a restructuring. New positions, colleagues, practices and faces. New methodologies then follow as do new and sparkling technologies, all of which need to be assessed and, if appropriate, implemented. I cannot count the number of new technologies I am excited to implement and always list them as personal and professional goals in my annually submitted Professional Growth Plan. From my experience though, in this culture of change, there is often very little thought put into a conscious, proactive and effective reculturing of a school. If there is none, the culture unwittingly morphs and that can be dangerous as it invariably leads down a winding and uncharted road.

When I started out on my Master of Arts in Education I knew that I was being provided the opportunity to know and understand more of the current thinking in education. I also revelled in the fact that I could use this time to hone and develop that sometimes quite elusive skill of creating a synergy between theory and practice. But more than anything I was very aware that I lived in a school culture of change and wanted desperately to know how to use it to our advantage. I had been an educator for several years by that stage but then having recently been made an administrator at an international school in India it seems that the time was right to see what I could do.

Now, five years later, as I step through the door to my post MAED world, perhaps the most important goal for me is on a macro level. That of working towards improving school culture. It is a somewhat lofty goal but none-the-less an essential framework for all schools. To this end and quite early in my degree, I was reintroduced to the works of Michael Fullan and his "Culture of Change".

As an educator whose career has woven in and out of administration, I have seen and been able to exercise a modicum of influence over the culture of each of the schools in which I have been involved. It is my practice and now confirmed goal always to start with an understanding of the mission and vision of a school, which if designed and implemented well, are the core beliefs that infuse and permeate the school. Wherever I go, this is the first and foremost interest of mine.

So often the Mission and Vision of a school is that which is placed at the front door of a school or emblazoned in the hallways but unless educators of influence - and that is all of us if we are bothered - are prepared to live and breathe it and allow it to work its way into the hearts and minds of those that live and work within the school walls, it will remain just a plaque - a wordy and ineffective scutcheon.

Beyond this, but inextricably contained in it, is another of Fullen's aphorisms and clearly another of my goals. It is that of ensuring that a school functions with Moral Purpose. Without it, experience has shown me, schools can be directionless and the educators mired in the minutiae of day-to-day

classroom work. Then things like the "test" and "discipline" and "grades" become paramount and, we start to forget the true purpose of education.

Identifying and ensuring a Moral Purpose is often easier said than done but it certainly starts with a clear mission and vision and, is helped by a need (especially a need of mine) every now and then to remind myself figuratively, and sometimes quite literally, to lift my head up and see the "forest" that is made of so many "trees". In my mind having a clear Moral Purpose is almost the make or break of a successful organization. Therefore, in whatever position of leadership I find myself, I believe in the need to make sure that I hold onto what purpose we have defined and to cultivate my knowledge, understanding and skills in a world that doesn't offer step by step guidelines for working in a culture of change. It is I who must continue to adapt where necessary to help to create a sustainable learning environment.

And so, how does one do this? Turning the theory into practice is the hardest part but what is clear is that without some consistency of practice and failing an injunction to build an effective "team", it will not happen. Taking consistency as the cement then, the building blocks need to be clear, effective and planned moments of communication. It has been my experience that clear and consistent communication (in the right amount) builds confidence and commitment to the "product". The lack of sufficient communication, leads to rumour, gossip and ultimately the dissolution of any team. Clearly, we have a myriad of methods of communication at our disposal. Therefore, as builders of mission, vision and moral purpose, we (administrators) need to create an environment in which those personally invested - the students, their parents and staff - feel happy and ready to move forward with the school and, as a corollary, their learning. This comes through a well articulated and clear communication of the school's vision and values, not only by droll reminders of the school's constitution but by demonstrating ways that these values form part of our everyday lives. If I pick up litter in the corridors, my intention is to communicate an appropriate value which will hopefully translate - even for a few - into an understanding of what is expected. If I neglect to let staff know through an email or verbally at a meeting that I will be away at a conference for two days and that all issues should be addressed to person X, they could feel "out of the loop" and possibly prone to rumour about my whereabouts. If parents don't hear enough about their student's progress or recent learning initiatives they can feel detached from their child's learning and consequently separated from the school's purpose. One would be foolish to believe that this is the only way to build mission, vision and moral purpose but I have come to believe that it is clear that consistent communication is one of the structures that holds schools together.

I constantly come back to the unexpected turn my MAED has taken by delving deeper into the realms of Educational Technology. I see this as a fortunate turn when looking for new and innovative ways to communicate anything from mission and vision through to daily announcements. The many and varied ways of communicating theoretical knowledge and its practical applications that I have displayed in [the Showcase page](#) of my online [Academic and Professional Portfolio](#), are testament to what can be used to communicate. Further to this and through one showcase in particular, I found tangential benefits while sharing my learning about John Hattie's insistence that Visible Teaching and Learning is essential to

enable one to absorb the concepts within and around which learning is based. When presented to my staff at a Professional Development session, not only were Hattie's concepts well received but for some, new and innovative ways of presenting their own work were learned. Communication had worked on so many levels and the team grew just that bit stronger.

My learning has also helped to make me conscious of the fact that no matter how well defined a mission and vision the school has or; how well equipped it is with the latest in educational theories and technology, without an accessible and palpable leadership, the educators in a school - those at the front-line of the chalkboard - can often devolve into resentful, fearful, apathetic and often immovable staff. It, therefore, is another very clear goal of mine to exercise the right amount of, what Daniel Goleman called, Emotional Intelligence that will allow me to facilitate those with whom I work to attain the goals, stated aims, objectives and expectations over the course of an academic year.

Practically, I must remain conscious of my non-verbal communications. Often, a frown may have nothing to do with someone with whom I'm conferencing but it can affect their perception of me. This doesn't mean that I have to be happy and outwardly in control all the time but I do need to work at being aware of what I can inadvertently communicate. At the same time, showing areas of vulnerability can, if the receiver is amenable, allow for wonderful opportunities to build a team that supports and feels confident to identify its strengths and weaknesses. In essence, a team with moral purpose.

My last goal is to ensure that I engage in concerted, conscious and consistent self-reflection - both as an educator and a leader of educators. Self-reflection takes form when I actively seek quiet moments amidst the bustle of school-life and, I believe, helps me to be aware of the needs and triumphs of my teaching, my colleagues and the school at which I work.

At the same time, it is also essential to remember that teaching (and leading), in schools is not an end in itself. I, or rather, we as educators in schools should share the goal of being geared towards enabling the next generation of learners to live, lead and relate appropriately towards one another and the environment so that they are able to transmit it as well, if not better, to the next. That is a goal worth living for.

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2014