

## CHANGES TOWARDS MORE INNOVATIVE TEACHING & LEARNING

presentation to

Greater Wellington Secondary Schools Principals' Association - June 2018

Current situation: there's some/much doubt/anxiety about (some/much of) what we're doing as a society, a raft of analysis + theorising, a clamour for addressing the concerns...and a call for change/improvement.

Schools identified as the reform forum to tackle the twin targets of raising the bar + closing the gap, excellence + equity.

The first questions are: How much doubt/anxiety is there - in you, your staff, your school community?

You? Likely to be down to your missionary/visionary zeal, personal/professional fulfilment factor, available energy after dealing with routine + random disrupting matters, appetite for reform, the legacy you inherited when you took on the job.

Your staff? Organisational culture, morale, leadership growth, interest, how committed they are to regenerating their professional commitment.

School community? Likely depends on breadth + depth of discussion with them; what students, parents, board are saying to you about what they need that's not currently sufficiently there, how aware they are of the analysis + call for change, and what your feeder schools are doing.

In schools, we've largely come to see change/improvement as meaning more 'future-focused' or '21stC' or 'innovative' practice; quite probably it's also about addressing engagement issues + about the credit-farming mentality v 'rich'/'deep' learning and about inter-disciplinarity v silo & cell-'ness' of conventional secondary school structures.

You may well harbour reservations of varying degrees about some/all of the above, but it's difficult to get beyond acknowledgment of these systemic conundrums when league tables, Tomorrow's Schools rivalry + neo-liberal compliance requirements prevail.

So, first step appears to be finding agreement that there are sufficient shortcomings about what we're currently doing to warrant a concerted

commitment to change things. This is going to be complicated by the probable staff continuum ranging from 'yes, it's serious, let's get on with it now' to 'our results are good (enough) – it ain't broke'.

The challenge now is how much consensus is required before you make the move - and what exactly the move is.

You've swallowed the readings, blogs, podcasts, keynote speakers – the messages are consistent: something (many things) better change... but to what?

If it really is all about 'student-centred', the 6 Cs, soft skills, and the curriculum's front end, then what are the prime apparent solutions out there? Project-based, problem-based, MindLab-style, re-doubled inquiry learning? What are the 'cutting edge' schools doing? (and how relevant is their story if they're a new-build in a comfortable suburb with a heavily-resourced start-up team?)

Whatever you're drawn towards, there may well not be extensive staff knowledge or overwhelming trust about what it is and whether it would work. So the move towards change may well quickly become more circumspect than compelling, and the question hanging in the air becomes "Are we doing **it**?" (when nobody is entirely sure what **it** is).

Reservations abound and the biggest concerns seem to be: apprehension about collaboration undermining the private autonomy of traditional practice; potential workload around cross-curricular planning; uncertainty about how well credits can be replaced as tangible motivation for learning activity; lack of clarity about how to measure skills and competencies; doubt about how receptive students and parents will be; student capacity to buy into the self-management and teamwork pre-requisites; whether the buildings will fit the practice; and, of course, that underpinning unnerving question of 'Will these changes work?'

Tangled up in these concerns at the end of last year, I prepared a position statement for the start of Term One with the title 'Our school development – why, what, and how we could/should re-design' (a 40 page compilation of observations, theories and assertions about innovative pedagogies) and as a navigational aid, I reached for Viviane Robinson's 'Reduce Change To Increase Improvement'. Her key points: change won't necessarily lead to improvement; declaring that change is needed risks blaming colleagues that what they're

currently doing falls short; justifying change on the basis that it's 'best practice' or 'taking advantage of an opportunity' will only generate mistrust; leaders requiring staff to be implementers of their theory of what needs to be fixed means no collective ownership; if leaders seek to bypass, to impose change without ongoing debate with colleagues throughout the process, it's doomed; there needs to be persistent questioning of the claims made for the change - an active seeking of 'disconfirmation'; prefer 'being evaluative' to 'being judgmental'; and 3 questions which should always be asked are: Why do we need to improve? What is wrong with what we are already doing? What exactly are the problems we are trying to solve?

Answering these 3 questions prompted the best collection of staff feedback I have ever encountered.

So far this year, half the teaching staff have been involved in project-based learning trials with junior classes and half have visited schools around the country; some of us have also checked out what more enterprising feeder primary and intermediate schools are doing.

The difficulty of this change surpasses all of the other major educational developments I've been involved in over three decades in this country. National curriculum, standards-based assessment, NCEA, cultural responsiveness, restorative practice – all top-down packages with largely clear lines of implementation. In contrast, this move towards innovative pedagogies should rightly come from within the school – and be evolved collegially, specifically for the school. After years of audited mass imposition of change, there are many appealing elements of individualised self-determination here. But it's been hard for us all. It dominates the agenda; it's enveloped in uncertainty – not only in terms of in-school implications, but against a backdrop of Kahui Ako formation, the reviews of NCEA and Tomorrow's Schools, and another round of salary negotiations highlighting compromised professional morale.

The idealist inspirational quote goes: "A shared vision is not an idea...it is rather a force in people's hearts...at its simplest level, a shared vision is the answer to the question 'What do we want to create?'" Granting ourselves licence to go after what we might have always wanted to create is definitely exciting – as long as your people are with you.

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