Lead Learner: Who? Why? How?

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Who is a lead learner?

The notion of 'leading' is usually understood as being 'in front of' or 'above' others. Such notions are unhelpful when we seek to understand the role and attendant dispositions of a *lead learner*. As distinct from a *line manager*, who has clear accountabilities in a *vertical* supply-and-demand organisational chain, a lead learner's attention is focused *horizontally* on optimising the opportunities for learning— their own, and that of their colleagues.

The fact that many senior staff in schools find themselves having to fulfil both roles – that of line manager and lead learner – can lead to some confusion and/or conflation when it comes to enacting both roles effectively.

While there is no doubting the importance of 'leading learning' in schooling policy documentation, the extent to which this sort of leadership differs from mainstream notions of 'leading' is yet to be fully acknowledged. Leadership is almost exclusively seen as involving line management, as encapsulated in role descriptions, key performance indicators and more broadly in 'leadership theory'. Little wonder, then, that individuals who find themselves asked to 'lead' a professional learning community of their peers experience not a little confusion about what the role involves. They may feel that they are not 'expert' enough, nor do they have enough 'seniority' or 'experience' to be invited to take on this responsibility.

Because a lead learner is neither 'in front of ' or 'above' others, it is important to *unlearn* the idea that it is about being an 'expert' or of 'senior' rank. Similarly, it is important to jettison the idea that such leadership is about the modelling of, and the relentless pursuit of, 'best practice'. Instead, the lead learner's role is to build their own capacity and that of their peers to create and exploit collaborative opportunities for professional learning. Where line managers are enrolled in *risk-minimising* through meeting compliance and accountability standards, the lead learner also seeks out opportunities for *risk-taking* in the interests of improving practice.

Why lead learner now?

Why is it so vital that the risk-taking role of *lead learner* is as well understood and affirmed as the risk-minimising role of *line manager*?

No professional educator would need to be convinced that the exponential proliferation and transformation of information generation and flow across the globe is making for massive social and cultural transformations not just for the next generation, but for everyone. So no-one would need convincing, at least in theory, that classroom practice must change to ensure the learning opportunities

they make available are responsive to these monumental cultural shifts. We know from recent research on effective schooling that when teachers pay professional attention to *colleagues*, there is likely to be *more learning pay-off for their students*.[1] In other words, a collaborative learning-oriented culture among teachers has more impact on student outcomes than resource-rich schools where teachers work in isolation – 'alone together' – in relation to each other.

Despite the fact that teachers are generally people-oriented and altruistic in their individual dispositions, the matter of building and maintaining a collaborative learning-oriented culture across an entire school is not an easy task. As one long-term observer of schooling puts it, "the entrenched norms that prevail among teachers have always been those of autonomy and privacy, not those of open exchange, cooperation, and growth".[2] In other words, many teachers still retain a sense of themselves as teaching in 'my' classroom, with 'my' kids, doing 'my' subjects 'my' way, cut off from what is happening in the classroom next door and across the corridor.

With all the evidence we now have that "team-oriented management practices, focused particularly on continuous improvement of pedagogical practices, have a positive impact on outcomes",[3] and with digital tools opening up virtual learning spaces and new modes of interaction, the lead learner role has never been more important. In other words, the teaching era of Gulliver among the little people has well and truly past. But this is not always evident in the daily work of schools. Indeed, teacher-as-Gulliver still seems to be the pedagogical norm in many schools and classrooms.

How to do it?

There are a number of distinctions that need to be made by anyone in a 'lead learner' role, apart from distinguishing this role from that of 'line manager'. The distinction between *comfortable congeniality* over *collaborative collegiality* is a crucial one, because improved teacher practice is not produced out of warmth and interpersonal friendship alone. Indeed, professionalism can be blocked if there is a congenial consensus that comes to substitute for authentic, professional conversations focused on enhancing learning. Real collegiality demands "a foundation of *shared commitment to appropriate candor in the service of collective growth*"[4], and this is not easy to enact in school communities.

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[1] Anrig, G. (2013) Beyond the Education Wars: Evidence that collaboration builds effective schools. see http://tcf.org/assets/downloads/20130404-beyond-theeducation-wars-intro.pdf, accessed 29 October, 2013.

[2] Evans, R. (2012) Getting To No: Building True Collegiality in Schools, *Independent School Magazine*, Winter, http://www.nais.org/Magazines-Newsletters/ISMagazine/Pages/Getting-To-No.aspx, accessed 29 Oct, 2013.

[3] Anrig, G. (2013) *Beyond the Education Wars: Evidence that collaboration builds effective schools* op cit, p. 4.

[4] Evans, R. (2012) Getting To No: Building True Collegiality in Schools, *Independent School Magazine*, Winter, http://www.nais.org/Magazines-

Lead learners understand the extent to which teachers are likely to want to affirm each other, but that this imperative may result in the learning priority taking a back seat.

It is also true that 'time poverty' can be a valid reason not to take on anything that seems extraneous to the specific accountabilities that come with line management. It is too easy to feel like a pawn in a very busy game in which most of our professional activity is simply knee-jerking to the latest 'urgent' request. And too often, line management accountability is the 'urgent' work that drives out the important work of professional learning.

An effective lead learner is a player, not a pawn, in their workplace because they have taken control of their own 'attentional economy'. They know in broad terms how they allocate their time and they protect their priorities, or adjust them to changing circumstances. Below is an example of the attentional economy of one secondary school principal who wanted to explain to herself why she felt she could not pay enough attention to the things that really mattered to her, ie, building the learning culture of her school. For four weeks she collected data about how she spent her time using post-it notes to document the nature and duration of each activity. Having made her attentional economy visible to herself, she then consciously made decisions to spend less time on some issues (eg, she out-sourced some work around financial and property matters) and spent more time on staff/student pastoral care and informal community time.
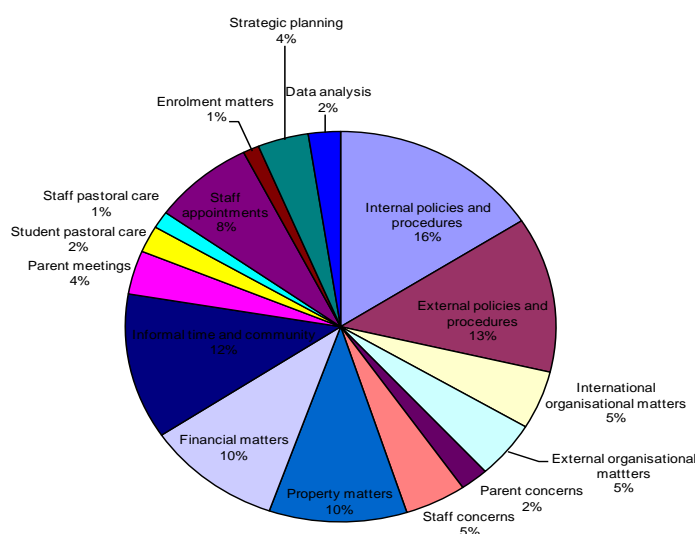

Figure 1: A Principal's attentional economy[5]

Newsletters/ISMagazine/Pages/Getting-To-No.aspx

[5] from Perry, L. and McWILLIAM, E. (2007) Accountability, Responsibility and School Leadership, *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, Vol 7, No 1, 32-44.

Lead learners like this principal learn to be astute boundary-riders when it comes to protecting both personal and shared collegial learning time. They protect valuable meeting time by ensuring that 'flooding' of learning by management work is a rare occurrence. A way of guarding against 'flooding' is to anticipate and pre-empt discussions around accountabilities (eg, nature and timing of testing, reporting deadlines etc) using emails or shared on-line sites. (Note: routines need to be established about when and how pre-emptive information is to be accessed.) Meetings are then at less risk of being consumed by bureaucratic demands – instead, it is possible to do a quick check on consensus – 'anyone doesn't agree on the propositions outlined to you earlier in the week'. It is important that as little time as possible is spent on hearing a colleague give 'another reason why I am feeling annoyed/dispirited/fed up'.[6] Not only is this likely to be dispiriting for everyone else, but it can easily become a counter-productive routine in itself. It is not a matter of suppressing dissent when it needs to be heard, but well-rehearsed lamentations about why certain things can't be done can be huge time-wasters as well as convenient excuses for inaction.

An effective lead learner allocates precious time to the pursuit of specific and agreed learning goals focused on improving professional practice. The degree of clarity about precisely what it is that the group is seeking to improve is as important as the idea than no one member of the group is *the* expert in this area. All are learners. If, for example, the group would like to improve its capacity to guide students' project work, then there needs to be a more specific focus arising out of this, eg, how might we use Inspiration (or another) software package to optimise student capacity to self-manage project design. In other words, topic areas such as 'questioning' or 'group work' are not sufficiently focused for exploring in learning teams. The lens needs to be brought in more tightly around a specific aspect of that broad pedagogical area.

Meetings that are set up as learning opportunities become places where ideas and techniques are tested out in ways that have face validity – and later catalytic validity – for everyone in the group. An effective lead learner works towards this end by 'mining the anthill' of the group, ensuring that all practitioners involved see themselves in the picture of 'leading' and 'following', from the newest to the most long-term members of staff. Professional learning is an 'alongside' process, not a 'top down' one. Of course, effective lead learners are at the same time scanning the horizon for useful ideas – making use of conferences and on-line networks to inform themselves about new pedagogical possibilities. But the fundamental principal is the horizontal sharing of practice in which everyone is a contributor and a learner.

Effective lead learners ensure that there are protocols for answering the question: 'How would we know we are improving?' Evidence of improvement can take many forms, from quantitative data to qualitative reflection. But

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[6] See Stanley Fish: http://chronicle.com/article/You-Probably-Think-This-Song/35523, March 22, 2002).

professional judgement is needed to decide what counts as evidence. As Frederick Hess reminds us, '[t]oday's enthusiastic embrace of data has waltzed us directly from a petulant resistance to performance measures to a reflexive and unsophisticated reliance on a few simple metrics – namely, graduation rates, expenditures, and reading and math test scores…. The result has been a nifty pirouette from one troubling mind-set to another; with nary a misstep, we have pivoted from the "old stupid" to the "new stupid".'[7] It follows that credible evidence of improvement is unlikely to be synonymous with an individual teacher's mere assertion that it is so, just as it is unlikely to be an individual test score or set of scores.

As consultants to schools over many years, both of us authors have listened to teachers describe what they are about to do in a classroom, and then proceed to teach in ways that appear to us to be far from the expressed intention. Yet they remain convinced that what they say and do are synonymous. We have also seen large-scale investment in gathering and reporting data that appears laudable but contributes very little to enhancing the learning culture of staff and students across the school.

Finally and most importantly, lead learners place themselves squarely in the centre of a *re-professionalising* process[8], one that does not presume that real expertise has to be helicoptered in from a distant place or exists only in senior team members. It is for this reason that terms like 'best practice' or 'showcasing' are to be avoided, because they connote a fixed and certain end-point which fails to acknowledge the true nature of professional learning for improved practice. Effective teaching a decade ago may not be optimal in 2014. An effective lesson Monday morning may be far less effective on a Friday afternoon, or with a different cohort. The point of leading learning is *improving* practice. And it is most likely to occur when the work of leading learning is valued, understood and acknowledged at all levels of a school-wide community. And that means a school community unambiguously committed to teaching and learning better tomorrow than today.

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[7] Frederick M. Hess *"The New Stupid"* in *"Educational Leadership",* December 2008/January 2009, Vol 66, No 4, 12-17.

[8] For more on teacher re-professionalising, see our article Schooling for Personally Significant Learning at http://www.ericamcwilliam.com.au/schooling-for-personally-significant-learning-is-it-possible/