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2. SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM TEACHING TO LEARNING

Thinking about What Matters for the Learner

INTRODUCTION

Framing teaching as a ‘craft’ is an interesting idea and one that has been widely discussed in educational literature (Grimmett, 1992; Hoffman-Kipp, 2003; Kelchtermans, 2009; Pratte, 1991). On a number of levels this notion resonates with what I value about my professional practice, an acquired expertise that is carefully passed on through dialogue and modelling with skills that are cultivated and refined over years.

Over twenty years of working within the teaching profession, this thinking has guided my efforts to improve my teaching. Through ongoing reflection and evaluation, I have continually tried to hone the technical aspects of my practice. I have always paid attention to my choice of planned activities. I have tried to reconsider the questions I choose to ask; the assessment tasks I use; and, the feedback I provide. All of the questioning and reflection on my practice is driven by the constant need to make judgements about how well my students are progressing and how that looks in comparison to what I anticipate might be their learning trajectory. I have endeavoured to reflect in this way in order to better inform my development as a teacher and to build on what has gone before.

Like most teachers, as I look back on my teaching I have my success stories, but I also acknowledge that there have been many times when my teaching could have more effectively met the learning needs of my students. It was this thinking that made me look carefully at how I engaged in professional reflection and evaluation. I began to notice that the focus of my thinking has always been firmly fixed on me: *my* planning; *my* delivery; *my* questioning; *my* assessment tasks; *my* documentation; *my* plenaries; and, the feedback *I* provide.

Whilst I did this with the best intentions for my students and their learning, it seems that throughout my career my reflection and evaluation has always focused primarily on the activities of my teaching. Focusing only on what I was doing, left little scope for me to effectively notice what was actually happening for the learners in my classes, in particular, how they were experiencing learning and how they were working to construct understanding. I began to wonder what might happen if I paid less attention to teaching and more attention to learning.

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As I slowly shifted this focus, I began to see my students differently and this new lens began to magnify opportunities for powerful learning. This adjustment refocused my reflections and allowed me to better understand not only what my students were learning but also how they were learning.

At St Joseph's, placing the learner at the centre of our professional dialogue and practice has become a shared focus for all teachers. So as I was reframing my thinking, I was fortunate to be working with teachers who also shared a similar desire to think differently about their practice.

As we began to consciously position student learning at the centre of our professional dialogue, our planning conversations began to change. We began thinking and talking more deeply about what matters for quality learning and to more seriously consider what that might mean for our teaching. This work has shaped our purpose as teachers; we now collectively have high expectations for student learning and actively seek ways to support such learning.

Our school leadership supports a learning culture where teachers are expected reflect on their practice by considering the quality of the learning opportunities they provide for their students in every curriculum area. This chapter examines how working in this way has informed our professional thinking as teachers and has shaped our practice across our school.

THE LEARNER: WHAT WE VALUE AND ATTEND TO AT ST JOSEPH'S

A number of key themes have emerged that characterize the work we do at St Joseph's and the decisions we make about what matters for our students' learning. Together, teachers work to:

1. prepare students for an uncertain future, explicitly considering the implications this intention has for curriculum planning;
2. consider the needs of our students, in particular how their contextual reality influences what they need to learn;
3. create effective conditions that will develop meaningful student learning; and,
4. focus all teaching to achieve personalised learning for all students.

Preparing Students for an Uncertain Future

We often hear unsettling reports in the media about the uncertain nature of future workforces in our society, in particular the importance of yet unknown technology and hence the dispositions and thinking skills employees will require to not only cope but be innovative and successful (Griffin, 2012; McWilliam, 2008; Thomson, 2011). It is common for Teacher Professional Learning Sessions and Parent Information Evenings to include a short video outlining occupations that did not exist ten years ago; developed to meet a need in our changing society. Helping our students face such an uncertain future raises a number of questions for their learning: "How do

we, as teachers, prepare students for occupations that presently don't exist?"; "What knowledge, skills and attributes will such roles require?"; "How can we anticipate such learning needs when the future remains uncertain or ill defined?"; and, "What learning opportunities will appropriately support students to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they need?" Parents and teachers alike are conscious of the changing nature of work; a lifetime career in a particular occupation is highly unlikely for today's students.

With a vastly uncertain working life looming for today's students, any teaching that maintains a fixed focus on curriculum content alone is no longer sufficient. Locally, curriculum changes have been made in an attempt to highlight the need to address this challenge through the inclusion of such capabilities as Creative and Critical Thinking, Ethical, Intercultural and Personal and Social Capabilities often as a set of discrete knowledge and skills taught explicitly in and through the learning areas (*Victorian Curriculum Foundation to year 10*, 2016).

As teachers we must continually determine the skills, knowledge, dispositions and understandings our learners need as we prepare them to engage with their world. At St Joseph's we openly discuss these concerns and acknowledge that to face what appears to be an uncertain future, our students will require attributes that enable them to develop the critical thinking, creativity and problem solving skills that can be applied in various situations.

At St Joseph's one way in which we attempt to face this challenge is by organizing curriculum through the Multi Domain¹ approach. The remaining areas of curriculum are planned and taught through a whole school approach which builds inquiry units around eight key concepts. These eight units take place across a two-year cycle. The eight concepts which frame these units are: Identity and Diversity; Relationships; Systems; Wellbeing; Place; Change; Sustainability and Decision Making. These concepts are deliberately broad to provide teachers with opportunity to not only plan together to meet curriculum requirements across grade levels but to also meet the specific learning needs and interests of students within each class.

Working together, teachers at each year level within the school develop learning intentions related to these concepts. These learning intentions are expressed as key understandings and align with selected content from the mandated curriculum. These understandings provide a shared learning focus for each unit. Each teacher attends to these understandings by using the key concept, e.g. 'Relationships' to create a context for student learning that is meaningful and relevant to the students in their class, engaging their students' interests and current knowledge.

Teachers also determine how best to use this context to promote rich questions from their students and in this way ensure that curriculum content becomes personalized – developed in ways which align with students' individual needs and experiences. While the learning experiences and developmental focus of each class may be differentiated, the overall learning intentions for each year level remain the same. Staff are expected to have a thorough knowledge of the required curriculum expectations, i.e., curriculum expectations as outlined for their Grade level as well

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as those for the previous and following Grades. This enables teachers to more effectively scaffold student learning.

Using eight concepts to inform the selection of content does however pose a tension for teachers and leadership. This tension arises between students' entitlement to the whole curriculum, and the magnitude of expectations that make up the mandated curriculum.

The crowded curriculum is indeed an apt description for the expectations imposed on schools through nationally developed curriculum documents. Expecting teachers to effectively attend to all the mandated curriculum runs the risk of cultivating a culture of checklists, whereby skills and knowledge are products that can be (need to be) ticked off when 'learnt' by students, or even less ideally, when taught by teachers.

At St Joseph's, through our professional dialogue, we have questioned the necessity of exposing students to all of the knowledge, skills and understandings as set out in curriculum documents. We want to focus on what they need for their future and we are also acutely aware that time constraints can potentially restrict opportunities for deep learning.

The leadership team has determined that attending to less curriculum content and developing more meaningful and rich understandings is the preferred alternative for our school setting. In response teachers have been released from the pressures of meeting all requirements of a crowded curriculum and have permission to reduce the breadth of content covered in favour of deep learning.

Given our philosophy of personalised learning, the challenge has become, "How do we determine what elements of the curriculum to include and perhaps more importantly, what to omit?" As we have come to see, responding to this challenge poses more questions as we grapple with the notion of deep learning and how we create the conditions for this to occur. Together in our professional dialogue sessions we continue to explore this issue and remind ourselves that our students and the quality of their learning must always remain the focus of our planning and decision making.

Consider the Needs of Our Students, in Particular How Their Contextual Reality Influences What They Need to Learn

At St Joseph's teachers are encouraged and supported to think deeply about what learning matters for our students. We have grappled with the question of 'why we do what we do?' As described in the previous section, teachers select curriculum according to understandings which are developed through eight key concepts, but we are continually reflecting on the question of what learning matters for our students at this time? This thinking drives decisions about the relevance and importance of selected curriculum content.

The school leadership team, and then the staff as a whole, have spent time delving deeply into determining the attributes and dispositions we aspire for our students.

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We have considered the contextual reality of our school, the current social context that defines the larger world and the uncertain future our students may face. As a Catholic school, our beliefs and values about individuals' relationship with God influences decisions we make for our community and the actions we undertake in our dealings with others. With this thinking in mind we have agreed upon five aspirational dispositions that define the inherent qualities of mind and character that we value for our students.

Whilst acknowledging the important partnership that exists between home and school in the formation of our students, after seven years of primary school education we hope that our students will leave as learners who will:

1. have conviction to serve with dignity;
2. be flexible and responsive to circumstances;
3. be creative and critical thinkers;
4. be effective and articulate communicators; and,
5. be informed and active citizens.

These aspirational dispositions have become the lens through which our teachers determine what they need to attend to in every aspect of learning and teaching. These dispositions are not a definitive list, however, they are what we have come to see as important for our learners, in our community, at this time. So together with the understandings discussed in the previous section, these dispositions help our teachers to select and work productively with curriculum content.

Creating Conditions for Learning

Over recent years we have focused our professional learning on expert teaching and what makes an expert teacher. As a staff we have unpacked chapters of "What Expert Teachers Do" (Loughran, 2010) and used some chapters from this book to frame our Multi Domain planning documents. The natural progression from our conversations about expert teaching has been a powerful shift to discussions about how to help teachers cultivate expert learners. As a staff we have engaged in robust dialogue questioning such things as: "What makes an expert learner?" and, "What makes a learner successful?" As a consequence of those considerations we have discussed such things as the influences on our students' ability to: ask questions; reflect on their learning; set goals; take ownership of their own learning; collaborate with others; share their understandings; or perhaps, take action.

In many schools, teacher release time is spent planning lessons, with discussions centred on selecting activities that allow students to demonstrate mastery of a particular concept. At St Joseph's, planning sessions for Multi Domain are deliberately referred to as 'dialogue'. Facilitated by Kathy Smith, the dialogue begins with broadening teachers' understandings of a particular concept which then moves the focus firmly to the student as learner (see for example, Chapter 3: Teacher

Professional Learning). Teachers working at the same year level work as a team, discussing the understandings they want their students to develop and the ways they plan to provide experiences which will immerse students in the given concept (see Chapter 6). At all times, discussion is focused on the conditions the teachers will create to prompt and probe student thinking to support rich learning.

The value of this collegial dialogue has only been made possible due to the structure and supports put in place by the school's leadership team. The sessions occur regularly; each session is allocated a substantial amount of time and casual relief teachers are employed to ensure the classroom program can continue uninterrupted. Teachers know that this form of professional learning is highly valued because the school leadership has embedded and supported this approach with organisational structures within the school's formal operation and programming.

Another crucial element to the success of this dialogue has been the development of a culture of mutual respect within teams and a shared language amongst the whole staff. The pedagogical reasoning teachers use to inform decisions made for each learner is couched within some agreed conditions for learning.

Together with Kathy Smith, the staff discussed what it might mean and then developed and articulated specific conditions they considered important for authentic learning. Recognizing the ways in which conditions for learning make a difference has become increasingly evident to us through the ways in which students develop particular skills, knowledge, understandings and behaviours. To facilitate such learning, teachers:

1. create a learning environment that promotes student voice and provide opportunities for students to take action;
2. develop lines of interest that connect to overall understandings;
3. attend to the importance of pre-assessment data, using this information to shape learning;
4. see each inquiry as an opportunity for personal and professional learning, an opportunity to work together to brainstorm and become oriented to a topic;
5. create conditions for deep learning;
6. value and build on student opinion and thinking;
7. scaffold students' skill development to enable each student to reach increasingly sophisticated skill levels;
8. give students the permission, authority, knowledge and opportunities to become independent learners;
9. nurture each student's personal and interpersonal skill development;
10. incorporate student voice in learning and assessment; and,
11. identify a clear purpose for learning.

As further described in Chapter 9 these conditions are created by teachers to facilitate a classroom culture of inquiry which provides learning opportunities specifically designed to meet the needs of each student.

A Focus on Personalised Learning for All Students

The teachers at St Joseph's place great importance on personalising learning for all students. We acknowledge that children come to school with different needs, different interests, different experiences, different expectations and different ways of learning. Therefore, we need to be highly skilled in noticing (Mason, 2002) in order to pay attention to that which is required for each learner to experience success. We must then be able to effectively enact that which is derived of that level of noticing. Doing so though presents pedagogical challenges because in a contemporary educational setting, as we work to determine what each student is ready to learn, what content is appropriate and how we can maximize the learning opportunities for each individual, we must simultaneously also be paying close attention to how each learner is making sense of their experiences. Insights into learning and teaching in this way change that which a teacher notices, and as a consequence how they practice and how it influences the nature of student learning.

In striving to respond to these challenges (noted above) and by remaining focused on the learner, it becomes immediately obvious that as teachers we must place the learner at the centre of our pedagogical decision making. That way, students can be actively involved and engaged in their learning, and ensure that our hopes and expectations for learning and teaching are more than rhetoric alone. In so doing, we purposefully take time to consider key questions such as: "What interests the student?"; "What questions do they have?"; "What goals do they have for themselves as learners?"; and, "How does this align with the mandated curriculum requirements and expectations?" We acknowledge the diversity of our students, and the importance of the pedagogical decisions we make to create conditions that allow all learners to access the curriculum in ways that meets their learning needs and develops their learning potential. Our teaching is the vehicle through which quality learning of this kind develops. Nurturing quality learning is a continuous, demanding and challenging process; it also captures some of what it means to be an expert teacher.

Through the inquiry approach we use in teaching the Multi Domain component of the curriculum, we are better able to personalise learning to the individual. Across a ten-week term, weeks 1–4 are taught using a guided inquiry approach. During this time, teachers refer to specific components of the mandated curriculum which are related to both the key concept which frames the inquiry unit, the understandings and the dispositions. During Weeks 5–8 students follow a more personal line of inquiry related to the concept. This may occur individually, or in small groups and all the while teachers monitor and question students as they work to support their learning and exploration of the key understandings. Finally, weeks 9 and 10 are typically a celebration of learning and an opportunity for more explicit teaching if required.

CONCLUSION

I set out to focus my professional thinking around student learning. This was easy for me to achieve when I found I was working in a school that supported and trusted teachers to make decisions about what mattered for their students. Working with my colleagues we have a shared understanding about quality learning and we talk about our practice in new ways.

In many schools there is a Teaching and Learning Leader, but at St Joseph's I have the role of Learning and Teaching Leader. I believe that this is not just a case of semantics but a declaration that at St Joseph's we place student learning at the centre of all that we do.

When I first took up this position, I saw my role as supporting our teachers to be the best they could be. This meant facilitating opportunities for reflection and dialogue about contemporary approaches to pedagogy, curriculum content and student progression. These aspects of my role are still important but I now see the priority and value of every pedagogical conversation beginning and ending with the learner.

At St Joseph's we strive for continual improvement in all that we do. As a leadership team we have given our teachers 'permission' to reflect on what learning matters for their students in their particular context. I now see that through our approach to aspirational dispositions we create conditions for deep learning that make a difference for students – collectively, and perhaps even more importantly, as individuals.

NOTE

- ¹ Domains are distinct bodies of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Science, History, Civics and Citizenship and The Humanities are examples of the different domains. Multi Domain means attending to more than one domain in a unit of work. Multi domain units work to provide learning experiences that enable students to link key ideas across curriculum areas.

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