

Chapter 9

Finding Our Way While Leading the Way

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will follow two teacher educators at RMIT University in Melbourne in their quest to lead and enable others to lead as they capture and critically reflect upon the constructs that frame the creation and implementation of a virtual primary school for pre-service teachers. The school is now six years old and has moved through numerous iterations, but remains guided by theories of Christensen (1997) and Boler (1999). That is, pre-service teachers, through their interactions with the virtual school, are challenged to question and rethink assumptions through sustained innovations and the disruption of habituated practices in learning and teaching. As the school has evolved, the authors have also had to rethink assumptions and build strong theoretical frameworks to support change.

BACKGROUND

At RMIT University's School of Education we struggled with ways to support and challenge pre-service teachers to think in fresh ways about learning and about teaching. The proliferation of digital technologies offers considerable potential to reconceptualise schooling and yet so often emerges as 'old frameworks on new realities' (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers 2004, p. 84). On professional practice, pre-service teachers often

experience little of the 'New Learning' argued for by research and leading educators (Papert 1993; Bigum 1995; ACDE 2001; Oblinger, 2003). We wondered whether beginning teachers were merely perpetuating an old model of schooling based on the model they had experienced, even when presented with new ideas about learning. Adopting new thinking can be problematic when novice teachers enter the teaching profession with at least 12 years of being a school learner. They come with intimate knowledge and firmly ingrained images of the practices of schooling from direct experience and from the

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media. Common practices in schools and repeated popular culture narratives tend to reinforce traditional beliefs and assumptions about learning, and of how schools are organized with beliefs being deeply connected to identity formations around teaching. We searched for a way to negotiate these tensions within an environment that most of our pre-service teachers were familiar with – a digital setting.

FRAMING QUESTIONS WITHIN A MULTIMODAL ENVIRONMENT

As our pre-service teachers encounter new kinds of learners in traditional classrooms on their teaching placements, they are presented with difficult teaching challenges. Disengaged learners struggling with content which has little connection with their worlds require approaches beyond ‘one size fits all’ pedagogies. The pressures of standardised testing add to a perceived gap between learning theory and learning realities. Within the context of needed change and pre-service teacher anxieties over establishing the teacher role, we created a new context for addressing some of these issues – a virtual school called Lathner Primary (<http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/education/lathnervirtualschool/index.htm> Password: Explore). Unlike many existing digital versions of schools, this was not a space intended to replace or simply complement university teaching. Simulations as learning environments are often being used in teacher education (Risco, 1995; Gibson, 2002; Ferry, Kervin, Cambourne, Pulisi, Jonassen & Hedberg, 2004). Existing simulations seek to replicate school settings in order to have pre-service teachers study them in some detail through discussion and role play. In 2001 America had 14 virtual schools that appear to replicate existing schools. However, as these simulations are pre-programmed, they often become static representations of schools. Our virtual primary school was to differ in that we wanted this school to be dynamic and reflect ideas

around what schools might become in response to New Learning challenges.

To realise our aims, we underpinned the design of the virtual classroom with the theories of Christensen’s ‘disruptive innovations’ (1997) and Boler’s ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (1999). Schools have changed over the past two decades to respond to some of the current and emerging demands on learners, yet it the very nature of these changes that require greater attention. Clay Christensen argues that the changes that have been undertaken are sustaining innovations; changes that better support the present system and make it more effective. Christensen advocates far more radical change that he terms ‘disruptive innovations’. Innovations of this kind are systemic and dramatically alter the existing culture.

In concert with Christensen, Boler (1999) argues that a pedagogy of discomfort enables us to see differently. Her definition includes both ‘an invitation to inquiry as well as a call to action’ (p. 176). In the process of examining ‘cherished’ beliefs and assumptions, we are likely to experience ‘defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing our personal and cultural identities’ (p. 176). As pre-service teachers typically embark on an education degree with the expectation that educators will unproblematically build their teaching identities, the process of breaking down some of the premises supporting those identities can be confronting. Boler argues that such a practice is ethically justified in the interests of willingly inhabiting ‘a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self’ (p. 176). This is an aim we embraced but needed to sustain through careful planning and resource design.

The virtual school was intended to become both a sustained innovation (that of educational reform) and a disruptive innovation (an upheaval from the known to the new). Schlechty (2005) argues that a disruptive change, such as giving students autonomy, may require the role of teachers and the authority of that role to be redefined. It appeared to us that initially both innovative

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