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Chapter 1

Introduction

I have come to realize that [as educators] our job is no different than those tasks carried out by architects and builders. We design, plan and orchestrate learning like an architect designs, plans and orchestrates buildings or structures. We then put on the builder's hard hat and try our best to construct the learning in a way our students will understand. While architects design and, in collaboration with builders, construct buildings, we construct the learning experience.

—Peter McKinnon, Curriculum Leader and Educator for 29 years.
(personal communication, November 2013)

One thing that became clear for us from very early on in our teaching careers was that one approach to teaching and learning does not support the learning of all students. As our careers evolved, we learned from our own successes and failures, through talking to and watching other teachers and consistently talking with our students in a way that showed them we wanted to help them with their “work”: learning. We began to wonder whether there was a correlation between how we were learning as teachers and the conditions we were putting in place for our students.

We struggled with questions such as: Why is it that some students seem to succeed and others don't? What do we say or do that works with students? What does not? Why is one strategy helpful for one student but not another? Why do we feel that we have to move ahead in our teaching when clearly our students haven't understood the initial concepts, key knowledge and skills? What is it that we are doing that leads to success and failure with our students' learning? Why is there such disparity in teacher practice? What do we do with what we learn from watching others teach? Which way is the best way? In essence, we were making decisions about what was right for our students every day with a limited understanding of what we needed to consider from a learner's perspective.

Our subsequent work with teachers—as part of school leadership teams, as coaches, consultants and mentors—indicated to us that many teachers are teaching without any due consideration to the process of learning, just as we had! Many teachers we have worked with express confusion, anxiety and a sense of inadequacy in their teaching practice. The combination of a rapidly expanding research base for teaching and learning, pressure from government, society, community, parents and colleagues to improve learning outcomes, and the very natural cognitive complexity of the teaching and the learning process, can make teaching an exciting yet daunting profession. As our expectations for higher results increase, so does the need to understand some key constructs that build successful learning experiences.

We started to develop our theories on learning based on our own experiences as both students and teachers. It became clear that we needed to make a subtle change in our thinking—from “teaching and learning” to “learning and teaching”. The goal of the framework we present in this book is to increase levels of learning in classrooms through building understanding of learning, talking about learning and reflecting on learning in a way that benefits the learner.

We make the distinction between *learning* and *teaching* as often they are used in the same context. For teachers to become architects of learning, they need to consider those aspects of learning that enable students to develop their generative knowledge, which allows for retention, understanding and active use of knowledge. Once teachers have identified and deeply understand critical constructs of learning, they can begin to see the implications in their planning and teaching. If teachers can't make those links, they will perceive any system or school initiative to improve teaching as an add-on and just something more to process in an already cloudy and clogged up mind.

Focusing on the Learning

As teachers, we hear and read about student-centred learning often, and yet the reality in the classroom, in our experience, can be very different. Student-centred learning refers to teaching practices that shift the emphasis in instructional decision making processes from centring on teacher criteria to one that centres on learning impact. As part of an action research project with the Australian National Schools Network Curriculum Design Hub in Victoria, Australia, we asked teachers from twenty-two different primary and high schools the following questions in relation to their curriculum planning:

- What's working well? (These are things you are proud of, are going well and can be built upon.)
- What's non-negotiable? (These are things you don't like, that get in the way or that you can't do much about.)

- What's a “must change”? (These are the things you don't like but can and must change.)

We collated the responses into those with a whole-school perspective, teacher perspective or learner perspective; only a very small number of all responses mentioned the learner. Of those responses that mentioned the learner, there was some mention of learners, but not learning; there were general comments about student engagement and individual student needs.

The core business for every school, teacher and student is learning, so it struck us that we spend very little time at schools actually talking about the learning. There is little point considering the teaching without understanding learning and what impacts it.

In fact, when we think about our own classroom teaching and our time spent in curriculum leadership roles, we realise we devoted most of our time to planning, teaching and subsequent activities—but not to the learning.

Learning needs to take more of a centre stage in our schools and classrooms. Early on in our own classrooms, we often equated success with students who were on task, had completed what we had asked of them, or at least worked through it to the best of their ability, and had displayed a level of compliance to our expectations. While part of this was due to our limited time in the teaching profession, part of it was also influenced by school culture. The following are some (not all) of the cultural elements that were typical of our classroom-based experiences:

- We matched content to activities.
- We organised content week by week, often over the course of a term.
- We got through all the standards or learning outcomes over a week, term and year.
- We viewed busy and compliant students as fully engaged.
- We felt that we didn't have the time to support all students because we had to move on to get through the content (after all, reports were due soon)
- We would often talk to the students about what was covered rather than what was learned.
- We incorporated many different programs and activities, making learning connections difficult to establish.
- We felt as though we had too much to do and not enough time to do it, and meetings about planning, reflection and preparation kept us from our classrooms.
- We had many external interruptions to our program making it impossible to do anything in depth.

These realities of school life contribute to a teacher's ongoing challenge where the focus is entirely on teaching the content and not on learners learning the content.

John Hattie (2009) outlines key questions to ask so that educators can move away from the experiences we encountered by challenging traditional beliefs and conceptions about teaching and learning:

- How can we determine what is best to teach next without attending closely to what students already know?
- How can we choose materials without any evidence that these are the optimal materials?
- Why do we seek to keep students engaged and busy but not to ensure that they actually learn?
- Why do we choose activities that provoke the most interest, rather than asking what leads to students putting in effort? (Is it the effort, not the interest level of the activity, that is important?)
- How do we maximise the challenge of the learning goals and create structures for students to learn via the challenge, rather than structuring the materials so that it is easy for students to learn?

What is focused on within a school environment reflects what is valued. Leaders must focus on learning and structure schools to allow teachers to do the same:

- Professional discussions should focus on student learning rather than on school organisation and administration.
- Curriculum development should be based on what students need to know and how they are going to learn rather than on what needs to be covered. The majority of curriculum conversations should start with, “What do our students need to know and how can we plan to facilitate, teach and support their learning?” rather than, “What material do we need to cover?”
- Meeting schedules should be predominately structured to suit the learning needs of students, not administrative needs that then take precious time away from our core purpose and away from time for teachers to collaborate around student learning.
- Teachers should have sufficient time to discuss, reflect on and plan for their students’ learning, rather than feeling overwhelmed with their additional responsibilities and frustrated that they do not have time.
- System initiatives should support and enhance teachers in their work, not redirect school focus.

It is not surprising that learning often does not take centre stage. Quite often, survival is the focal point in classrooms as educators and school leaders try to simply get through the week. Students have often expressed that they feel the same way. It is clear something has to drastically change.

The Key to Change: Some Promising Research

Research supports the need for change in mainstream education. Never before have we seen such a tide of optimism in being able to move from traditional schooling to schooling that truly centres on learning and supporting all students with greater urgency. The following lines of thinking could help improve the likelihood of success in learning for teachers, students and, ultimately, the whole school.

- Schools need to develop a collective commitment to believing all students can and will learn at high levels (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many & Mattos 2017).
- Educators must understand fundamental constructs for learning to take learning to deeper, more meaningful levels for students.
- These constructs for learning have an impact on the instructional strategies that teachers develop and the way that they design the learning experience.
- The things we say and do as educators have an impact on learners; we must have a heightened awareness of this fact.
- We should be Teaching for Understanding.
- We should be creating learning spaces that respect and honour all students.

In our work with students, teachers and leadership teams, we have sought to bring key pieces of research together to raise student achievement as we have grappled with the issues surrounding curriculum planning, effective teaching and student learning to promote higher levels of student engagement.

Professional Learning Communities

One of the most substantial reforms in education is the transformation of schools into Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Tom Many and Mike Mattos' work (2017) has been highly influential in assisting schools to move from a culture centred on teaching to one centred on learning. Members of PLCs work in collaborative teams that focus on four critical questions:

1. What do we want each student to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
4. How will we respond when a student already knows it?

The power of the PLC at Work™ model is that it centres on results of learning before anything else. When we focus on learning, we give a clear message that this is what we value above all. Building a culture of professional learning that centres on learning, therefore, becomes pivotal