

Critical Reflective Commentary- Values & Vision in Education

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The MA in Education programme has given me the vehicle to reflect on a wide range of topics and issues relating to education, learning and myself as an educator. Following is an exploration of these values and beliefs about learning relating to the literature. I will start by discussing the idea of bringing back the '**humanity**' to learning. Key to this is the development of authentic **relationships** and a sense of **community**. Applying **systems thinking** and **reflective action** can help to develop learning communities and strengthen the process of educational improvement. I will conclude by attempting to **challenge current paradigms** of education and schooling.

Bringing back the humanity to learning

Human learning is a complex social phenomenon involving an ever-changing flux of values, motivation, creativity, inquiry, change, personal improvement, skill building and the gain and application of knowledge. I believe we need to bring back the humanity to learning. 'Humanity' in this context refers to the things that we just cannot (and perhaps should not) measure- for example: creativity, passion, the spirit, experience, spark, inquiry, fun, motivation and zeal. These are among the things that contribute to great teaching and hence powerful learning. Caine and Caine believe that today's schooling is "...divorced from experience... (2001:25)." We need to rectify the disparities between education and learning.

Truly powerful human learning involves the learner in most if not all of the decisions relating to **what** is learned, how it is learned and **when/where** it is learned. This kind of learning naturally ties in with real life and is therefore useful, meaningful and motivating. There is something innately intrinsic and useful about it. Unfortunately, this kind of learning is not obvious in many schools.

The obsession to standardise education is a control mechanism that manifests itself through national curriculums, unnatural "high stakes" assessment and accountability measures. This has limited our ability to create truly natural learning environments (Wrigley 2003:90, Caine and Caine 2001:112, Stoll and Fink 2002:166). Sutton (1995) suggests that standards and assessment are counter-productive when used as a form of control because our view of learning becomes fragmented (Sutton 1995: 107-111). This 'shallow' implementation of assessment drives education towards ever-decreasing standards- the opposite of what we intended in the first place! We have created a culture of "...low trust, high surveillance... (Mahony and Hextall, in Wrigley 2003:100)." The affect of this culture is to dilute the power of great teaching as well as great learning. We are losing sight of the spirit of learning- and the creativity of teaching.

"It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion (Albert Einstein, in Schilpp 1949:3-94)."

Many schools are more about power and control and there is a need to minimise this. Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham (1999) believe that learning "... cannot be mandated

(1999:12)." John Holt stated "...we do not need to motivate children into learning by wheedling, bribing, or bullying. We do not need to keep picking away at their minds to make sure they are learning (Holt 1983:293)." William Glasser says that coercion and control essentially ruin learning. He believes our rigid adherence to "...what is right to know" is one of the main causes of most students under-achieving, or even worse, rejecting schooling (Glasser 1998:237-238). There is some very obvious evidence that shows this: the increase in student exclusion (particularly minority groups), league tables and the tendency to continue to place added burden on teachers and schools through initiatives such as the National Literacy Strategy (Wrigley 2003:91-103). Many students learn in spite of what we try to teach them! Part of the problem is our narrow view of human learning and the conditions in which this is encouraged.

Authentic, trusting relationships are foundational to quality learning in every sense. Without trust and openness people will not learn, or be able to encourage learning to happen. Caine and Caine illustrate the affect authentic relationships have through developing an environment of "...relaxed alertness..." in which everyone is a learner (Caine and Caine 1994:145-147). They explain the importance of emotions and how quality facilitation can support deep thinking, or reflection, within 'complex experience'.

Howard Gardner, in his book *Frames of Mind* (1993), goes a long way towards deepening our view of intelligence. Others, such as de Bono (1993), Costa (1991:17-18) and Goleman (1996) have helped deepen our knowledge through their work on thinking, creativity, cognition and emotional intelligence. This is only a part of the picture because the approach still seen in many 'western style' schools is divorced from reality- there is no connection with the spirit of learners, their emotions, their desires

and dreams or their creativity. We need to look at other models of education, particularly from the eastern traditions.

The recent shift towards an increased emphasis on spirituality in education is partly due to the need to develop awareness, empathy, compassion and what Miller terms "...whole human beings who can think, act and feel (Miller 2002:i)." As far back as 1956, Aldous Huxley, one of the great 20th century writers and thinkers, emphasised the importance of: "Training of the kinesthetic sense. Training of the special senses. Training of memory. Training in control of the autonomic nervous system. Training of spiritual insight (Nakagawa 2002:150)." Experiences of this kind set the foundation for reflection and community building in learning.

Reflective action develops relationship and community in learning

There is a rich body of knowledge around reflection and reflective learning. From this, it is clear that this aspect of change involves some degree of ambiguity and uncertainty (Schon 1983:50-68), is complex (Hoban 2002:143-144) and at times, difficult (Sandholtz, Ringstaff and Dwyer 1996: 17-78; Hoban 2002: 1-3; Veugellers and Vedder 2003:381; Coombs, Penny and Richards 2003:3). Schon terms the use of 'reflection-in-action' which helps us to understand the cognitive complexity of reflective practice (Schon 1983: 50-68). I will use the term *reflective action*, which implies how the cognitive and behavioural aspects of reflective practice are interdependent. *Reflective action* has the potential to develop authentic relationships and hence community in learning. I have found that reflective action is a learned activity for some and for others it comes more naturally (Gelter 2003:337-343; Clarke 2002:123-129). It is closely tied in with our identity as teachers (Woods 1995:70, Caine and Caine 1997:88, 147-149,

178) and is foundational to creating and supporting human change. Two aspects of reflective action that I will unpack are the notion that deeper, more explicit reflection supports and builds the capacity for school improvement; as well as the importance of the role of the teacher in this.

Coombs, Penny and Richards believe that reflective skills in themselves should be seen as learning experiences that are "...conversationally deconstructed and reconstructed..." to arrive at understanding (Coombs, Penny and Richards 2003:3). Deeper and more explicit reflection has enormous potential to support change. Deeper reflection allows one to uncover, analyse and sometimes adapt one's own beliefs, values and actions. Making reflection more explicit and obvious builds natural accountability and ownership (for an example see <www.christchurchict.org.nz/Project/PCriteria.html>) for change as well as opening us up to what Robert Dilts calls being "...open to doubt..." and therefore able to change <www.nlpu.com/Articles/article3.htm>. Barbera Prashnig writes:

"To deal with any situation successfully you need to know YOURSELF
and how to handle your weaknesses; you also need to know YOUR
STYLE and how to utilise your strengths (Prashnig 1996:230)."

I believe that one cannot know oneself as a teacher without first knowing oneself as a person (for more information see: <www.rtweb.info/ch05>). Knowing oneself as a teacher helps to build what Caine and Caine call high levels of "self efficacy", thus enabling educators to be more supportive of change when it happens; more cognitively resilient (Caine and Caine 1997:91-116) and therefore more able to empower others.

When there is a critical mass of people in an organisation reflecting more deeply and explicitly, they are building their capacity for educational change. Reflection starts at an individual level; therefore, the role of the teacher is crucial.

Hoban believes the key to educational change is developing learning for teachers (Hoban 2002). As quoted by Donald Schon (1987), the eminent American educator Carl Rogers explained: "...the very expression of thoughts and feelings usually withheld, manifestly divergent from one another, has the potential to promote self-discovery." In this description of reflective action, Schon believes that Rogers has reframed teaching in a way that "...gives central importance to his (i.e. the teacher's) own role as a learner (Schon 1987:89-90, in Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham 1999:12-13)." This has huge implications for professional development in terms of how we nurture learning communities. The application of systems thinking is important.

Applying systems thinking to learning communities

We know that learning is a complex activity, yet why do we call learning for teachers and others in the workplace 'training' or 'inset'? Training is what we do to animals in order to make them comply! We need to adopt a complexity view of educational change (Hoban 2002:30-40). In his seminal book "The Fifth Discipline", Peter Senge explains that we need to see the world as a whole rather than in parts. Senge believes that "... the unhealthiness of our world today is in direct proportion to our inability to see it as a whole (Senge 1992:68)." We need to change our thinking and establish systems whereby educators "...apply what they know and believe about learning to themselves as learners (Clarke 2002, in Hoban 2002:142)." This involves two changes: 1.) Moving from a mechanistic view to a humanistic view of learning, and 2.) Designing

professional learning, rather than professional development or training.

If we engage the heart, mind and spirit of educators then we will empower them to take on and become an integral part of change. Do we want people who support and are able to create, mould and develop change, or do we want people who are passive 'consumers' of change? I believe the former is more beneficial.

The introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) professional development provides a convincing example of how we have implemented a narrow view of learning for teachers. The area that is outdated the fastest is the nature and type of ICT skills required, yet the aspect that changes the slowest (and is therefore the most long-lasting), are people's beliefs and values about learning and the place of ICT. The irony is that by far the most energy spent is in developing skills, with little or no importance placed on helping teachers understand their beliefs, emotions and values about the role of ICT in learning. This is a mechanistic approach to professional learning. We need to balance skill building with *reflective action* (to empower individuals), *community building* (to transfer empowerment of individuals throughout a school) and provide multiple influences on learning using a holistic approach (Clarke, in Hoban 2002:117). This is what I call a 'professional learning system'.

The idea of a *professional learning system* implies creating the conditions to support natural learning. It allows us to consider the richness of human learning in the context of school improvement and guides us towards developing what Avis (2003) calls a "...knowledge creating school..." that is continually developing its "...levels of social capital (Avis 2003:375)." This builds community, adaptability and what Senge refers to

this as 'creative tension' (Senge 1992:152). Thinking of learning for educators as a *professional learning system* enables us to construct rich, complex experiences that allow teachers to take charge of change themselves and become a part of it. This in turn strengthens the school's ability to embrace school improvement and change.

Challenging current paradigms of education and schooling

A number of forces are attempting to improve education, yet their real impact is having a negative influence. These forces are at odds with what most teachers go into education for in the first place. They are external and include uniformity, accountability, standardisation and control. How do we overcome the tendency to increase standards through standardisation; accountability through increased measurement; and control through more and more layers, interventions, 'strategies' and fixes?

I agree with authors such as Wrigley who believe the current educational climate is anti-democratic (Wrigley, 2003:89-112) and in many ways contradictory to truly powerful human learning. Political agendas are driving this climate, which are dictated by market forces (Wrigley 2003:99). These market forces are set on capitalist ideals and do not take into account the richness of human experience in learning. The result of this expression of greed is to create burn-out; decreasing morale and coercing educators towards implementing a limited and shallow education system. Mahony and Hextall (2000) highlight this in their descriptions of how we have developed a culture of "...low trust, high surveillance..." in which teaching is defined, according to "...mechanistic and technicist assumptions" (in Wrigley 2003:100). Education is being 'dumbed down' because schools are too focused on preparing students for exams, performance, accountability and measurement- all at the expense of creativity, spontaneity,

inspiration and learner-control.

Caine and Caine emphasize the importance of creating an environment where students feel a sense of 'relaxed alertness' and are able to engage their executive functions (Caine and Caine, in print 2004). They contend that a key to establishing the type of higher-level engagement is to create in depth dialogue between learners and teachers that engages them deeply in issues and ideas. One aspect of creating this environment is to look at the nature of the curriculum.

Much of the curriculum is not relevant and will not have a lasting influence on young people today. Krishnamurti believed that in "...much of education there is an emphasis on shaping the child into something other than what the child is, with the emphasis on what the child *might be*. When the time reference shifts from the future to the present, the task is discovering *what is*; education changes from being preparation for what *might be* to engagement with *what is* (from Forbes, in Miller and Nakagawa 2002:102)." Furthermore, traditional ways of delivering curriculum are not allowing for deep, meaningful learning. Assessment practices in U.S., Britain and other countries suggest an emphasis on memorisation of facts and preparation for competitiveness in a global marketplace. Preparing people to operate successfully in society is important- but surely not at the cost of self-understanding! We need a more balanced curriculum that emphasises knowing *oneself* as much as it emphasises knowing *things*.

Our growing knowledge about learning and how the brain works are providing powerful platforms for developing new models of how to teach. Couple this with a notion of reflective action, spirituality in learning, learning communities and we have something

unique and different. Therefore, our models for school improvement (and change) must consider this.

Conclusion

It is clear that the current approach to education is not working because it does not create powerful learning environments for students or teachers. We need to shift our thinking to find a closer match between **human learning** and curriculum, assessment and standards. Learning, whether it is for students or teachers, needs to focus on developing ownership and direction for those whom it is for- rather than “Improvement by command from above... (Wrigley 2003:103).”

Educational change initiatives need to take a systemic approach by focusing on the fundamental underlying problems rather than focusing on the symptomatic problems (Senge 2001). School-based change needs to look at human process and structural elements that include relationship and community building in its design. We need to reinvent curriculum and take some of the elements we have today and establish a more holistic approach to empowering people for life rather than just work. When education and learning finally meet, we will have achieved the huge step, and that is to create **balance**.

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