

Leading with Knowledge in Communities of Practice

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It takes leaders who are passionate, committed and selfless to step up and lead confidently and knowledgeably in Communities of Practice. In this article, I take apart the words in the title: **'Leading' - with Knowledge' - in 'Communities of Practice'**, to understand what educational leaders at every level must focus on in order to ensure successful achievement of their collective core business: increasing *all* students' growth and achievement.

Leading

Once the basic definition of leading and leadership is agreed on, i.e. to influence often, leading, for me, is about 'leading alongside'. True leaders let others step out in front, to use their words and actions as their own. It takes practice to become an authentic leader who can listen and hear rather than talk and be heard, who can acknowledge and celebrate the leadership of others.

In our research when writing *Putting FACES on the Data: What Great Leaders Do!*, we identified three attributes or dimensions of strong leaders (Sharratt & Fullan 2012): Knowledge-ability, Mobilize-ability, and Sustain-ability. I have also developed, and am continuously revising, a leadership self-assessment tool identifying, through ongoing research, additional dimensions such as Imagine-ability (Sharratt & Harild 2015), Co-Labour-ability (Sharratt & Planche 2016) and the most recent, Adapt-ability (Sharratt 2019). Leading adaptably *with knowledge* in *Communities of Practice* requires leaders who are flexible enough to become learners while leading - a somewhat humbling position!

Specifically, Adapt-ability requires leaders who:

- embrace and lead through the ambiguity of chaos in these turbulent, changing times
- begin with data at every meeting - collected from Learning Walks and Talks (Sharratt 2013-2018) in their own classrooms and in other schools
- see technology seamlessly integrated into the school day as effective and efficient in order to empower learners and learning (Sharratt 1996)
- are ambassadors for the team and organisation
- ask the tough questions to empower self and others
- know how to excite, initiate, and pull things together
- allow self and colleagues to 'fail fast' and keep going
- keep distracters away
- leave no room for hierarchy or bureaucracy

- manage little and lead often, modelling and monitoring, flexibly altering course when needed
- navigate tensions between collaborators and innovators
- self-evaluate actions and consider the next piece of self-learning needed.

These attributes have become part of a reflective self-assessment tool (Sharratt 2019) that leaders can measure themselves against to determine where they might go to find their next professional learning opportunity. This leads us to think about 'with Knowledge' in the title.

With Knowledge

Over 400 research respondents considered 'the capacity of leaders to demonstrate they were knowledgeable' to be their number one criteria for being a successful leader (Sharratt & Fullan 2012). Among other attributes of this dimension, participants said 'knowing how to teach' makes a huge difference in becoming a 'trusted, competent, credible leader'. One participant said: 'Leaders needed to leave their egos at the door and become learners alongside staff members'. Such specificity and clarity of leaders who have teaching expertise was the thread that wove through the reflections on what constitutes strong leadership at every level.

Leaders, who are knowledgeable about teaching and learning, and who lead successfully in communities of practice:

- model the belief that *all* students can and will learn, and all teachers can teach given time and the right assistance (Parameter #1 in Sharratt & Fullan 2012)
- lead their teams to use multiple forms of 'data' to determine impact on learning and see themselves as evaluators of their impact
- set targets that indicate high expectations, concentrating on evidence of progress and growth, as well as achievement
- monitor the 'cognitive demands' of rigorous classroom performance tasks
- have deep understanding of and laser-like focus on the expected high-impact assessment and instructional practices
- provide for and participate with teachers in ongoing professional learning to ensure they become knowledgeable in the wise and timely use of relevant assessment data to differentiate instruction every day
- have coaching conversations by 'talking' with teachers about their practice

- foster learning for everyone by providing ‘intellectual stimulation’ at every meeting or during Professional Learning Community time.

When leaders are adaptable and knowledgeable, they lead confidently, achieving ever-progressing capacity through the Communities of Practice that they establish.

In Communities of Practice

A key concept here is that word ‘communities’ – the understood sense is that everyone is a contributor, that all members feel a sense of ownership of the data, and that everyone is empowered to feel responsibility and accountability as they do in any community to which they belong and maintain their ‘community-ness’.

In education, much has been written about the impact of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Harris et al. 2017; Sharratt & Planche 2016) when PLCs are focused on and engaged in the purposeful use of data to guide their ongoing inquiry questions. It is a cyclical practice that evolves as the PLC work progresses within a department, within a school. When PLCs reach beyond one school’s doors to become a collective of schools, they care about and promote the ‘learning of all’ and the ‘sharing of learning’ in a networked community.

I have experienced the critical importance of operating norms and protocols in these communities that embrace the following guiding principles as success criteria:

- everyone’s voice is important - we listen respectfully
- being respectful in our engagement builds strong working relationships that lead to empowerment
- we reflect on our work as we learn with, and from each other
- in collaborating, we empower our own learning and the learning of our colleagues
- we build learning capacity together
- collaborating authentically builds confidence and success
- we persevere - we believe all students can learn and all teachers can teach with impact given the right time and support
- we believe in our interdependence to achieve students’ learning goals
- having shared beliefs and understandings about student achievement guides our work.

Through co-constructed operating norms and protocols for the work, ‘Networked Communities of Practice’ focus on building an expert teaching force, with members who know how to assess, and to differentiate instruction for every learner. Their collaborative actions speak louder than words.

In a recent case study from Metro Region in Queensland, Australia, Assistant Regional Director, Racquel Gibbons, worked with a cluster of eight schools (approximately 8000 students) to undertake tangible actions to improve students’ reading performance (Sharratt 2019).

Figure 1 is only one example of the eight schools’ unique and meaningful Data Walls to track students’ growth and achievement in reading. Note that every FACE is known, visually and in text, to teachers and leaders. Through the rich conversations that resulted during the co-construction of the Data Walls, students who need extending, are stuck or struggling, are identified to take part, one student at a time, in collaborative Case Management Meetings. In these, capacity for high impact instruction is built and impact on each student is assessed via a presented work sample.





Figure 1. Reading Data Wall in a Queensland Primary School, used to monitor improvement in individual student learning, target individual support and to plan for teaching. Reprinted with permission from Department of Education and Training.

Gibbons writes: 'What has been heartening in this collaborative exploration has been the expansion of cross-school networks by having:

- a common, clear focus
- high expectations and targets
- increased purposeful interaction among all schools
- strengthened leaders' and learning teams' resolve as an intentional outcome.

Teams are not just meeting and collaborating on the scheduled days but seeking ongoing opportunities to do the work together. As one principal commented: 'Being part of this broader team with a common pursuit has given us the courage to be innovative and creative, and afforded change in a much shorter timeframe than otherwise anticipated' (2019).

It is clear from this Networked Learning Community example that the clarity and focus of the senior leader, Bushell, and the 'community-ness' she created, caused the improvement to happen - at lightning speed. This Community of Practice can be replicated everywhere if leaders reflect and act on the 'Five Lessons Learned' from this case study:

1. When data sources are used to develop improvement targets, a clear focus and success criteria are easily co-created.
2. When Data Walls reveal which student FACES need to improve, differentiated assessment and instructional strategies are undertaken collaboratively.
3. When networks are seen to be supportive and to empower every voice, teachers are willing to take risks to change practice together.
4. When teachers and leaders conduct Learning Walks and Talks in each other's schools to identify high-impact strategies together, they see what is possible and return to their own schools and classrooms to implement them in their own contexts.
5. When senior leaders work alongside school-leaders, teacher-leaders, and teachers, improvement is tangible, validated and celebrated.

The strength of this Networked Community of Practice, or any successful Community of Practice, lies in the fact that its improved achievement can be replicated anywhere, anytime. However, it takes

the will and perseverance of the leader and differentiated district/regional resources to see it through to successful completion. Bushell and her colleagues used Learning Walks and Talks as the vehicle to collaborate, give and receive feedback about what they were observing, and to evaluate impact. They continue to ask: 'How do we know all students are learning?'

Learning while leading

In Communities of Practice, educators must be encouraged to walk in schools, share evidence of high-impact strategies, and learn from each other. A high-yield process they use to look and learn is called Learning Walks and Talks (Sharratt 2013-2018).

Possibly one of the most impactful leadership and teacher 'learnership' tools I have found, Learning Walks and Talks are the ultimate in community-ness, and the source of many 'aha' moments. They are a powerful data collection tool when they are conducted daily to collect and interpret evidence of expected classroom practices. Quality teaching is impacted positively when leaders and teachers walk and talk together as a daily routine. Many high-impact approaches have been embedded in classrooms across schools because of lessons learned in other classrooms and schools.

When the rationale is clearly understood by all staff members, and a non-evaluative protocol followed, Learning Walks and Talks are a practical and very positive way of:

- observing alignment of school and system improvement plans
- seeing if professional learning is being transferred into classroom practice
- noting school trends and patterns over time
- hearing student and teacher voices through dialogue about what has been observed over time
- ensuring classroom tasks are robust and evocative of learning
- noting especially impactful assessment and instruction strategies in use
- determining if students know what they are learning, why, and how to improve.

As this is so important to the successful implementation to Communities of Practice, it bears repeating: Once the rationale,



Figure 2. Lyn Sharratt with Principals, Denise Gersbach and Vicki Bourne-Fallon at St. Laurence's Parish School, Forbes, Australia. Photo courtesy of Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes.

protocol and culture of trust are established, Learning Walks and Talks are included as a data collection tool so that system and school leaders become even more effective instructional leaders. Key in the protocol is that the Learning Walks and Talks process is positive, not punitive nor evaluative, and is designed through discussion, to offer insights into potential improvements in classroom instruction. In Figure 2, Denise Gersbach and Vicki Bourne-Fallon, discuss with me the many positive classroom practices observed after one of our regular Learning Walks and Talks together at St. Laurence's Parish School, Forbes, Australia.

A critical shared understanding is that after many Learning Walks and Talks in classrooms, a school leader, who will often walk with another instructional leader, will take a planned opportunity to provide descriptive feedback to teachers. It is only after many Learning Walks and Talks that the principal will have a true sense of consistent observations to share, as comments after only one round would be very misleading.

Learning Walks and Talks always begin at the Data Wall. Walkers take a FACE off the wall (figuratively) and walk to find him/her. What is s/he doing? How is s/he doing? Can the 'walkers' see if the teacher has differentiated his/her support for this student as recommended during a Case Management Meeting? Can students in any classroom visited answer the five questions that are shown in Figure 3?

1. What are you learning? Why?
2. How are you doing?
3. How do you know?
4. How can you improve?
5. Where do you go for help?

Figure 3. Five Key Questions

These are not only key questions for students to answer, but they are also critical for teachers' and leaders' self-reflection as they relate to assessment literacy (Sharratt & Harild 2015). When we are sure that students can answer these questions insightfully, then we know that the teaching in the classroom is relevant for, and clear to, students.

Likewise, when leaders and teachers can answer these questions, we know that there is alignment of the system's and school's vision: that is, a collective responsibility for the growth and achievement of all learners.

Implementing the Learning Walks and Talks process consistently is an opportunity to observe and look for expected, effective assessment and instructional practices. System and school leaders ask themselves: 'Are there any practices in place that this teacher could share with a small group of other teachers who are not quite there yet?', and, 'On the basis of what I have seen, what professional learning is needed for the whole group, a small group or individual members of staff?' Observations made during many Learning Walks and Talks in classrooms offer concrete visual evidence of how the learning is progressing (or not) consistently across all classrooms in the school, or across the system. These observations demand that leaders and teachers take action as 'omission is commission'.

Leading with Knowledge in Communities of Practice

In summary, what does it take to lead with Knowledge in a Community of Practice? It takes leaders at every level who commit to:

- trust- and relationship-building by doing the work together, building community-ness
- using student work as data to establish collaborative inquiries that focus on evidence of improvement
- protecting time, during the school day, to collaboratively inquire, walk and learn together
- embedding 'knowledgeable others' in every school as instructional coaches to guide the learning that becomes 'thinking-in-action'
- using facilitation skills to include everyone and draw out teachers' and leaders' hidden expertise
- reaching out across schools to build networked communities focused on discovering and validating powerful classroom practice.

In this article, the focus has been on principals' and teachers' impact on the students' FACES. Ultimately, we must ask: 'Through our Community of Practice working together for our common improvement, are all students becoming interdependent and independent learners who know how to learn?'

Lead Article

Are all students able to find answers for themselves or to seek them in conversation with their peers? Are all students resilient? If the answer is no, then what will we do about it? Just collecting and interpreting these facts alone indicates a great deal about students' self-regulation (or not) and their capacity to 'think critically' (or not) at every level, K-12: our vision, our responsibility and our accountability to determine.

Finally, knowledgeable leaders in Communities of Practice must determine if their members are also becoming the interdependent, independent, proud, competent professionals that they deserve to be, by incorporating Collaborative Inquiry and Learning Walks and Talks as community standards. Nothing less should be acceptable. As David Morrison, retired Lieutenant General of the Australian Army who was named Australian of the Year in 2016, asserts: 'The standard we walk by is the standard we accept'.

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