The next phase of schooling: The networked school community

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Across the developed world there are pathfinding schools moving into the next phase of schooling, the networked mode. Those schools have moved from the traditional paper based phase to the digital, and reached the stage where the use of the digital technology has been normalised by all the staff and the students in the school (Lee and Gaffney, 2008).

There is an identifiable subset of the digital schools that have appreciated their digital and networked technology frees them from the physical constraints of the old school walls and 'stand alone' mindset, and enables them to begin developing a mode of schooling that is networked and where the school works collaboratively with the students' homes in the education of the young.

Those efforts are being actively supported in a growing number of situations by their education authority, and national government. This shift to the networked mode is happening at the same time as the digital capacity of the average student's home across the developed world is increasing and often surpassing that in the average classroom. This shift acknowledges the young are developing their digital competencies primarily within the home.

The pathfinders have recognised those changes and have embarked on a quest to develop a model of schooling that takes advantage of the digital and educational capacity of both school and the home, to markedly enhance the quality and appropriateness of teaching and learning for all its students.

This approach – to create networked school communities – presents virtually unlimited opportunities to redress many of the structural shortcomings of the traditional school and to capitalise upon the openings available by the technology.

NETWORKED SCHOOL COMMUNITIES – 2009

At this stage of development the moves to the networked mode are mainly embryonic in nature with the schools and education authorities testing out the possibilities for teaching and learning, and the school's administration, communication and student reporting.

In most instances the new technology is being used to better perform the ways of old, be it to enhance administrative efficiency, student performance on the existing curriculum or improve tertiary entrance scores.

A notable exception is the United Kingdom Government's highly ambitious Home Technology program (http://www.becta.org.uk/homeaccess) that aims to ensure that every students' home has a computer and 'Net access by 2011'. This is the first time a major national government has recognised the vital role the student's home and its technology has to play in any national effort to enhance both educational outcomes and economic productivity.

Interestingly few if any of the current ventures into the networked mode, at the school authority or national level have sought to position the development within its macro context or link it to a particular mode of schooling.

NETWORKED SCHOOL COMMUNITY

That is what Glenn and I have sought to do in the forthcoming ACER Press publication, 'Developing the Networked School Community'.

Our desire with the 2010 publication is to place the developments in context, to note the distinguishing features of the networked mode, to provide a vision of what is possible, to elaborate upon the many educational, social, organisational, economic and political benefits to all schools moving in time to the networked mode, to discuss the kind of options available and identify the best way to implement the shift.

We have opted to choose the term 'networked school communities' to describe the type of school evolving in the networked phase. In so doing we wanted a simple term that embodied the essence of what was both happening and desired.

When we talk of networked school communities we have in mind a mode of schooling that is evolving, that will continue to grow and take on its own distinct form, as did the paper based and more recent digital mode of schooling, and which in the years ahead is likely to morph into another as yet unidentified mode.

"Networks are an organic form of organisation, which means you need to understand them as a process as well as a structure" (Lipnack and Stamps, 1994, p. 19).

The term covers all facets of the school operations, and not just the teaching and learning. It also encompasses the administration and communication of the school and the facility for the wider school community to contribute to its on-going development.

It includes all those activities, plus the myriad of others that now impact on the education of the young by virtue of the network technology's removal of the physical limitations of the 'stand alone' school and opportunities possible in a networked society.

A networked school community is thus a legally recognised school that takes advantage of the digital and network technology, and a more collaborative, networked and inclusive operational mode to involve its wider community in the provision of a quality education appropriate for the digital future.

HOME-SCHOOL NEXUS

Over the last fifteen years Mal Lee has written in The Practising Administrator, now the The Australian Educational Leader at length on the ever-growing digital capacity of the students' homes. He is committed to the need for schools to appreciate the factors in favour of the home and those mitigating against the school that will see the average home's digital capacity markedly outstrip that of the average classroom. That has transpired.

Figures prepared for the forthcoming book reveal the digital technology possessed at home by a class of thirty Year 6 Australian students was a factor of fourteen to fifteen times greater than that provided in their classroom. These figures surprised the authors who suspected the homes might have two to three times more resources: not fourteen to fifteen times greater!

The reality is the class use of digital technology constitutes only a small part of the young person's everyday use of a suite of digital technologies, more than half of which are usually banned from the classroom.
Many talk of a disturbing digital divide between the home and the school. We don't see the situation as a divide, simply a difference that if approached positively can be converted into an ever-stronger home-school nexus.

**Rationale**
The reasons for creating a nexus between the home and the school, and in time for developing a networked school community are many, compelling and varied. As indicated in the main they are educational, social, organisational, economic and political in nature with the educational and economic reasons probably being the strongest. Space means we'll need to hold over their elaboration to a later edition but suffice it to say they are immensely powerful and are fast coming to be understood by the more proactive national governments.

**The Vision**
The possible forms of the networked school community are virtually unlimited. Once one removes the wall the technology allows you to create any kind of school you want. The key dictate will be the type of school your community believes best fits your situation.

In embarking on the quest to realise the desired form of networked organisation it bears noting the school will most likely:
- evolve from its existing mode and use its current personnel;
- rely, at least initially on the current school leadership and most importantly its Principal;
- be wise, as are the pathfinders and adopt a graduated take up, learning from the initiatives as one works towards one's ideal set up;
- want to adopt an organisational mode that allows the school to flourish within a networked world and on-going change;
- need to learn to operate in a collaborative and networked mode, and to work within an increasingly networked organisation that makes ever greater use of teams and lesser use of hierarchy.

**The Invitation**
Our intention in this short article is to alert you to a major development in schooling and its possibilities for you. Within this context we invite you to think about building upon the technological developments made by your school, to dismantle the old school walls, begin harnessing the immense digital capacity of your homes and developing yours as a networked school community.

To assist you in your endeavours the authors have created a Ning at http://networkedschooling.ning.com that discusses the possible way forward.

We would like to invite you to join those discussions and if you so desire to contact us directly.

**Conclusion**
After more than 150 years of constancy – and largely abortive efforts to change the nature of schooling – the last decade has seen pathfinding schools across the world undergoing fundamental and permanent change.

Those changes have occurred within the digital schools. If yours is a school that has achieved that normalisation and is operating as a digital school the authors encourage you to give serious thought to moving to the networked phase, developing as a networked school community and reaping the very considerable benefits on offer from a home-school nexus.

**References**

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**A Quiz for People Who Know Everything**

1. Name the one sport in which neither the spectators nor the participants know the score or the leader until the contest ends.
2. What famous North American landmark is constantly moving backward?
3. Of all vegetables, only two can live to produce on their own for several growing seasons. All other vegetables must be replanted every year. What are the only two perennial vegetables?
4. What fruit has its seeds on the outside?
5. In many liquor stores, you can buy pear brandy, with a real pear inside the bottle. The pear is whole and ripe, and the bottle is genuine; it hasn't been cut in any way. How did the pear get inside the bottle?
6. Only three words in standard English begin with the letters 'dw' and they are all common words. Name two of them.
7. There are fourteen (14) punctuation marks in English grammar. Can you name at least half of them?
8. Name the only vegetable or fruit that is never sold frozen, canned, processed, cooked, or in any other form except fresh.
9. Name six (6) or more things that you can wear on your feet beginning with the letter 'S'.
10. What is Australia's foggiest capital city?

(Solutions on page 49.)