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Deep learning conversations and how coaching relationships can enable them

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Introduction

Deep learning conversations develop from places of deep reflection on practice. In the busyness and intensification of teachers' and leaders' work, these places are not easily found. However, educators wanting to enhance their own practice and that of others can learn to recognise more readily the opportunistic spaces and

places for reflection arising out of their 1001 interactions every day.

Coaching conversations are just as important in the *informal* interactions as they are in the more formal goal-setting or appraisal-type sessions. These deep conversations are different to other teaching 'conversations' where two people share their own stories, seldom delving into and enquiring

further about anything a colleague might say, and often creating two completely separate storylines in transcript.

These sorts of conversations are common in most schools (and public situations!); you might recognise them in this staffroom scenario:

T1: I don't know what to do with those three girls in my class.

T2: You should see the three I have in my room!

T1: They're so disengaged and cause problems in every lesson.

T2: I find I can't get through my curriculum content with my students.

T1: I am at my wit's end at what to do with these girls.

T2: I'm almost ready to give up teaching.

Bell rings. They hurry back to their classrooms.

Deep learning conversations are most likely to occur when the spotlight is on one aspect of practice. In the case of paired coaching, these conversations involve one person listening and learning by asking their partner deep questions and with that other person learning by reflecting on and then articulating and justifying their practices. So how might the interaction between the pair of teachers above have differed if they'd captured the moment as an opportunity for a deeper learning conversation? Perhaps it might have gone like this:

T1: I don't know what to do with those three girls in my class.

T2: What's happening? Tell me more.

T1: They're so disengaged and cause problems in every lesson.

T2: Is it every lesson? What do they do?

T1: Well, no, not every lesson, I guess. Today it was when we had to stop writing early and start in on our maths lesson.

T2: Weren't they disruptive during writing? What's going on and what are you doing when they really seem to enjoy their learning?

T1: I think when they're writing, they feel they're having success— they're confident about what they're doing. As for what I'm doing, I think I've established a lot more self-direction in writing than I seem to be able to provide in maths.

T2: Why did you stop writing when you did?

T1: Hmm, now that's food for thought! But maybe I could think about using some of the strategies I use in writing for maths. I could use more self-assessment in maths and allow more chances for the students to select the areas that they need to learn more in. Bell rings. Thanks so much! I've just had a break-through 'aha' moment, and plenty to think more about.

They hurry back to their classrooms.

Both teachers gain from this interaction, even though it's informal and somewhat hurried. Although Teacher 2 in the second scenario did not have the catharsis of sharing her own woes, she left the staffroom with new thoughts and ideas. And perhaps as importantly, she gained a boost of positive energy – a boost she could take back to her own teaching and her 'disruptive' threesome.

The value of the type of exchange depicted in the second scenario is heightened when teachers are involved in more formal collaborative practice. During these times, they talk constantly together and share stories about the practice they're engaged in. As already indicated, these coaching conversations can be even more robust if the teachers choose to focus on specific areas of practice.

Deep inquiry and critical reflection on practice provides teachers with opportunities to ask themselves: What do I bring to this practice? What do I still need to learn? What will I try in our work together tomorrow? They may ask these questions silently or, preferably, in my view, feel safe to sound out their thinking and questions publicly. When teachers share in this way, everyone involved is a learner.

In education, however, it is the bigger issues and changes affecting teaching that are the most difficult to explore through collaborative coaching. This is because they require us to exam-

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ine our very understanding of what it means to be a teacher or leader in today's educational climate. Effort to understand and solve complex problems typically causes dissonance in our current thinking, and it is this dissonance that challenges our values, beliefs and ways of seeing the world. That challenge, though, makes possible our deepest learning and, from there, the biggest changes we are consequently likely to make in terms of our identity and practice as educators.

Surfacing values, beliefs, assumptions

In essence, then, learning and change always occur when our values, beliefs and assumptions about the world are challenged in some way. In education, this 'world' is made up of the philosophies that inform our educational platforms in general and our understandings about teaching and learning in particular. Even more specifically, these values and beliefs centre around what we see as the purposes of education, the role of parents, the most important outcomes for students, the most effective teaching and learning relationships, the place of culture in the learning process, the ways in which learning best takes place, the role of assessment, and so forth.

One of the most important steps towards productive change is recognising the gap between our espoused theories of what we know is important in education and what we actually do in our practice. Deep learning conversations that involve observation of practice through coaching relationships can be key to closing this gap. It's also likely we'll feel discomfort and other emotions as we move out of the zone of our current knowing, so it's important for us to acknowledge that change or leading change processes will continue to be difficult unless we can fully understand that it is we, *ourselves*, who need to change first. We need to actively acknowledge that we are part of the current paradigm, problem or challenge, and that we may have to change in ways that will model for others the path towards transformation.

In the absence of reflection and deep learning, we unwittingly maintain those aspects of the status quo in education that need to change. We go on doing what we've always done, because ... well, we just do! In the midst of the bustle and stressors of our work, we fall back on the known, the easiest, and therefore the most comfortable. If unimpeded, unchallenged, we'll usually focus on the *how* and *what* of our practice— the content, in other words. We might find some new strategies and ideas and put them enthusiastically into our current practice. It's not surprising we act this way, given that the design of most professional development opportunities for educators favours these responses.

The majority of changes we see in education are therefore often ones that just tinker around the edges of the challenges. And that means little really changes in schools too. If we want real change, the transformative change that resolution of our most pressing problems in education requires, we need others to assist us in this change process, by asking the courageous questions and engaging us in deep, reflective, learning conversations. It's very difficult for most of us to know let alone ask ourselves the critical coaching questions that will help us problematise our practice,

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A listening, learning school culture is also vital to the success of collegial relationships. Making coaching skills an essential part of teachers' and leaders' repertoire helps build this culture because it promotes a **virtuous cycle of collegiality** and robust learning in the pursuit of quality teaching and learning

question it, and lead us into the profound and personal learning of change. We need challenge—but we also need *support*.

Coaching questions that count

The deepest learning conversations not only focus on immediate concerns and individual needs but also arise out of deep learning relationships. These relationships are ongoing. They include trust, respect and shared commitment to the study of teaching and learning. They also involve reciprocal learning opportunities. Importantly, they're free of judgement and therefore are a place of safety—a place where it feels okay to tap into and show our vulnerability.

These relationships are actually *partnerships in learning* and all that that concept entails. The deeper the relationship is, the more easily our coaching partner can ask us, in a challenging but always supportive way, to question the purposes and goals of our current practice. The collaborative coaching conversation, arising from shared teaching environments, is perhaps a less threatening learning approach for us than are larger, group learning forums. Focusing on one aspect of shared practice with a colleague and thoroughly critiquing it in the light of shared goals and desired outcomes helps us to stand back from our everyday praxis and look more objectively at how our own teaching and learning and, in time, that of others is currently playing out in the educational context of today.

As the level of trust grows within learning relationships, and coaching skills develop, colleagues not only feel better able to ask one another the more challenging questions but also more willing to share areas needing development. They feel sufficiently safe to move away from covering up any perceived areas of weakness, as is too often the case in professional development directed toward improved practice. The deepest learning occurs when we're encouraged, through courageous, supportive and therefore effective coaching practice, to locate our own areas for development and new learning and to discuss them with coaching partners even when we feel vulnerable doing so.

With regard to vulnerability, power relations or conflicts of purpose such as a coach also being a senior leader or an appraiser can adversely affect the relationship. But these tensions are not insurmountable if the relationship is sensitively negotiated and understood. Coaches need to be authentic and skilled, socially and emotionally, and our peers can fulfil this role with the right level of support and supervision of coaching practice. Peer coaching and/or collaborative teaching develop greater levels of collegiality, a natural development of which can be group coaching.

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In any coaching relationship, the ability to deeply listen is just as important as asking the questions that count. Asking with-

out listening and listening without asking does not create dialogue but rather monologue. True dialogue is what facilitates the change process. Each partner needs to serve as a coach who can take the other beyond the 'what and the how' of teaching and leadership practice and into the metacognitive realm of critically *thinking* about that practice.

More important, then, than the questions about *how* a coaching partner is going to do this or that and *what* he or she is going to do next are the questions that focus on *why*. However, why questions must be asked in a way that signals not judgement but a genuine wish to learn, and to have our partner learn, from the answers given. Here are some examples of why questions. This is not a list of questions for a coaching session but rather a list of the types of challenging questions coaches might ask:

- *Why* do you feel these students are so disengaged?
- *Why* is this important to you?
- *Why* are these particular groups not achieving as well as others?
- *Why* are you doing this in this way? At this time? In this place?
- *Why* do you think children will learn this best through these activities?
- *Why* do you think these strategies are the best ones for addressing this challenge?
- *Why* are these learning outcomes the most important ones for these students at this time?
- *Why* do you think meetings are the best places to form relationships with parents?
- *Why* do you think is this happening?
- *Why* do you think (or say) that?

When we're asked questions like these, and so need to articulate and justify our practice in response, we'll begin to examine our practice more deeply and therefore reflect more deeply on the interaction between our practice and the teaching and learning outcomes (for ourselves, for our students) we want to achieve. In short, hard coaching questions keep us firmly focused on the *relationship* between teaching and learning.

Why questions ultimately lead us to a space that I call '*what might be*'. This is because responding to the *why* questions we're asked requires us to critically reflect on our practice, to go on critically reflecting and to imagine possibilities other than those currently informing and shaping our practice. While our early answers to such questions may not yet reflect the deep learning sought, they will provide the beginnings of an ongoing coaching dialogue that takes our thinking well below surface thought and so challenges our mindsets.

The point at which *we* begin to change is the point at which we begin to see the new possibilities for practice. Our thinking changes and our mindsets change. Our cognitive framework changes, our belief system changes, and we personally move into the transformative stage of the change process. We change as an outcome of our new learnings and understandings; we're highly likely to have a clearer idea and the confidence to try different things that lead to the transformative changes that matter.

A brief example illustrating these ideas

Consider a school where particular groups of students, such as Indigenous students, gifted students, or those students with English as a second or third language, are not achieving as well as

they might. The school is working hard to support these students but is making little difference to their learning outcomes. Teachers and leaders have drawn on a few new ideas and strategies from traditional professional development and the research literature and incorporated these in their practice but still nothing really changes in terms of student outcomes.

A first step from a coaching context would be to ask the school's leaders and teachers why they think these students aren't achieving as well as others in the school or class or at their potential and then to listen carefully to the answers. If those answers are all about the students ('disengaged'; 'never brings homework back'), the parents ('never come to meetings'; 'never help with homework'; 'not interested'), and/or the school ('not enough time'; 'too many students'; 'curriculum's too full'), then no matter how many new ideas or strategies come the leaders' and teachers' way, there will be no real change in desired outcomes. This is because these educators will have not placed themselves *inside* the change process, inside the learning relationship; their mindset is probably one of 'It's all about others needing to change, not me.'

Teachers and leaders who think this way have not recognised that *they* need to be part of the change they want to see. As such, they need to be asked the hard (but respectful) questions that cannot help but make them think about what it is *they need to learn* or what *they need to change* in order to be more successful in their practice.

Wise coaches listen carefully and reflectively so they can continue to form the hard questions – whether relating to content or process – that arise out of and so are relevant to what their partner is saying. Sometimes bridging questions (What is going on here today?) will be required to reach into some deeper concepts about education. Sometimes more direct questions (What does the data tell you about the needs of these three students?) may be appropriate. For coaches, a sense of the colleague's readiness to engage in deep reflection and responsibility-taking will guide the content and tenor of their questions; that is why a trusting ongoing learning relationship is so important.

The questions coaches choose might be one or two out of the list that follows, but only if those questions arise naturally out of what their partner is saying. Again, this is *not* a coaching script!

- What is the most difficult issue for you?
- Why do the students believe they are failing?
- What could you do differently this year that might make a difference?
- Why do the parents think their children are not succeeding?
- What do you think is the role of parents in their children's schooling?
- What are the parents saying about why they're not engaging in their students' learning?
- How does your knowledge of these students and their families influence your teaching?
- Tell me about a time when you had huge success in this area.
- In what ways does culture influence these children's learning?
- What advantages do these students bring to the classroom?
- What are you learning from the data about the needs of these students?
- What questions are you holding at the moment about these students and their learning?

As educators develop towards extended professionalism, they take responsibility for all students in their classroom, and then in their school – and then all children in education in their community, and all children in the system. When educators become system leaders, their level of accountability is **rich and deep**...

- Where are you going to find the answers to the questions you have?
- What frustrates you in your work with these students?
- If you knew the answer to this problem, what would it be?
- What would be the question you'd ask yourself at this time?
- What would you advise another teacher in a similar situation?

Ultimately, when we're asked questions that delve deep into our identity of what it means to teach or lead, we come right down to the basis of our depth of accountability to the children we have in our care.

The questions that matter are therefore those that *help us surface and examine our moral purpose* against the depth of our accountability in educational terms. This is the development of *rich* accountability, an accountability that comes from within, not externally, and is therefore congruent with the ideal of professionalism in education.

Exploring moral purpose

Most educators will probably tell you they came into teaching to 'make a difference', which is certainly an important part of the moral purpose of education, and thus teaching and leadership, but which is not a sufficient or sufficiently specific response to facilitate critical reflection and change processes. The big challenges for educators today—addressing inequity, developing modern learning pedagogies, being culturally responsive, teaching for diversity, teaching for sustainable futures—must be at the basis of any examination of strong moral purpose in education.

A commitment to equity begins with the children in teachers' and leaders' immediate care, most usually in the classroom. The pertinent question here is, 'Are all of these children reaching their potential?' The question positions equity as being as much about the gifted student who doesn't get extended as the student who is not reaching desired achievement standards.

As educators develop towards extended professionalism, they take responsibility for all students in their classroom, and then in their school – and then all children in education in their community, and all children in the system. When educators become system leaders, their level of accountability is rich and deep; or it should be. I consider that this level of accountability within the system as a whole has been chipped away by external policy contexts of competition and choice. I often wonder if it's just too idealistic to think that teachers and leaders can actually be as concerned for the children in the classroom next door or the school down the road as they are for those in their own classes or schools.

But if they were, imagine what might change with respect to education approaches in our communities and our country. What would we do in education if we could wave a magic wand, start with a blank slate, in order to offer the best education we could for all students? We know what we should do, but what would help us to do it? At the very least,

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educational leaders can and should be making a difference within their sphere of influence. Excellent examples can be found of school principals working together to address system challenges. But more needs to be done to develop leaders who can and will collaboratively step up to ensure that professional learning opportunities move teachers beyond practice isolated from that of their colleagues in other classrooms and schools and helps them bring a collective stance to the moral purpose of teaching. Coaching leadership supports leaders to be courageous in this way.

Questions that might help us to surface and examine our level of moral purpose might include:

- What do you know about inequity in student achievement in our education system?
- How do you feel about the inequity in the education system as a whole?
- Where do you feel we sit in addressing the under-achievement of students in this school?
- What do you believe will make the biggest impact on addressing student achievement?
- What are some of the most important things our students need to leave this school knowing or being able to do?
- What does equity mean for students in our school?
- Is it okay that some students leave our school without the necessary skills and capabilities for ongoing educational success? Why or why not?
- Are all students in our school continually fulfilling their potential? Is it okay that some are not? Why or why not? And what is our responsibility as teachers in this regard?

The way we can support ourselves and our colleagues to be courageous and stand up for what we know is right in education and to act with agency and efficacy is through having the deep learning conversations that bring our moral purpose to account. We therefore need to ask one another the right questions at the right time, the hard questions, in order to keep our focus on the moral purpose of education and how we can shape our teaching so it remains true to that purpose.

Many of the right questions can develop from research findings, policy and curriculum documents and standards associated with quality teaching and leadership. As educators we have to be a connoisseur of such knowledge because it helps us both lead and participate in the deep learning conversations with our colleagues that help increase our individual and collective feelings of self-efficacy and strengthen our ability to be agents of effective moral change.

Moral purpose and efficacy and agency

Some teachers in education not only feel their colleagues no longer care much about making a difference by improving the quality of their teaching as they should, but they themselves feel this way. Sometimes they have low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, do not see themselves as agents of change, and do not fully see themselves as part of the *relationship* of change. Instead, their thinking is all about others needing to change if the situation is to be addressed, or it may reflect the attitude that 'I've always done things in this way, and it works.'

As I mentioned at the start of this article, the intensification of our work and the expectations on us to process seemingly ever increasing and never-ending paperwork can make even the most

energetic and enthusiastic of us feel jaded and tired about change. Addressing aspects of working conditions, resourcing time to allow participation in those aspects of professional learning that are important, and monitoring and reviewing the implementation of initiatives can do much to help us and our colleagues feel more positive about the changes required of our practice.

An important part of the leadership work is to help teachers gain a coherent overview of policy and curriculum change and what it means for teaching and learning. If we can provide the structures, the room, the expectations, the energy, the time for change and therefore the opportunities that allow teachers to reflect on and develop their understandings of the broader educational context and of how that impacts on their work and their roles within it, then the changes in practice that we seek are far more likely to occur.

Deep learning conversations in these situations need to include questions that challenge assumptions and rebuild connection with moral purpose. These are the questions that help teachers increase awareness of how they see their identity in their role. The questions might be as direct as:

- What are you not willing to compromise on in trying to make a difference to these children's achievement levels?
- Who is responsible for the success of our school leavers?
- What would you stand up for when others might want you to sit down?
- What drives you in this work with students and gets you out of bed every day?
- Where, in this work, do you think you need more moral courage?
- How could you be supported further in exploring what new strategies will work most effectively?
- How would you define your moral purpose in one sentence?
- What are the barriers and how can we overcome them?

When we, as leaders and teachers, increase our awareness of our moral purpose in our work, when we surface and examine our values, beliefs and assumptions, we will often, *individually*, make the powerful decisions that favour needed changes in practice. Most importantly with regard to the value of deep learning conversations in this context is the support that comes from deep learning relationships: as teachers and leaders, we *do* need to feel supported, to feel we can be honest and go to our places of vulnerability; to feel that others are interested in our development and the fulfilment of our work.

Often, we need opportunities to see and learn what we don't know we don't know! Consequently, some of us may need to have practices modelled for us; to see what it all looks like. Others of us may need specific examples of strategies to try out and reflect upon in our next conversation. But once we do know what we need to know, we then have to meet the expectation that we will and can actively involve ourselves in our own professional learning, with that learning always directed towards transformative action with regard to our professional practice.

These processes are integral to deep learning relationships and to the deep learning conversations within them that can help revitalise and strengthen our moral purpose as educators and remind ourselves of why we went into teaching. As with students, we teachers and school leaders need to see success, to experience the process of small successes leading to greater successes, of small achievements leading to even greater achievements and

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greater energy for change. However, the most important thing any of us needs is the courage to act – to try out new ideas, to take risks, and to make the changes that we know in our hearts are essential and right in the world that is education today.

Further thoughts on courage to act

Recently, I asked a group of senior leaders in New Zealand what transformative change they were leading that felt courageous. One leader responded with a question of his own: 'As in what is in my heart and head, or what I've *actually* done?' I've also asked all senior leaders I'm working with in Australia, 'What are the hard questions you need to be asking in your school?'

I've found that the key issue emerging from the responses to these questions is not that leaders do not know what is right and important to do, or the right questions to ask; rather, it is the courage to act. My research has shown that leaders and teachers who are in strong coaching relationships not only feel a strengthening of their moral purpose but also the agency and courage to *act* on it.

Leaders often tell me that they feel very vulnerable in the school environment when leading change. They feel 'damned if they do and damned if they don't' because of the different groups with their different values within the school and its wider community. The ultimate outcome of having deep learning conversations set within deep learning relationships is that leaders and teachers tend not only to feel supported in their change leadership but also to find and have the opportunity to critically think through their current practice with a view to their future practice. With these supports and processes in place, they have the tools and confidence to move into praxis—the informed, committed action of educational leadership that improves the quality of teaching and learning practice in ways that count.

I therefore firmly believe that the courage to take action is what is most needed in education today. Whether we actively admit it to ourselves or not, we do know much of what we need to know, what should be done, what needs to be done and what must be done. What we need to do now is together step up into that moral agenda for change.

Further reading

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