# Sustaining Deep Learning – In Inquiring Communities of Practice

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When the Network of Performance Based Schools was first developed in 1999, we strongly believed that teams of teachers and principals working together and using powerful forms of classroom assessment could have a positive impact on learner confidence. Many teachers and principals agreed with us that learning gains were more likely to result from active use of thoughtful formative assessments at the classroom and school levels than from additional use of external forms of assessment.

Now, seven years later, we are more convinced than ever that we are moving in the right direction. Our personal experiences and professional beliefs are increasingly supported by compelling research evidence – evidence that suggests we can move much more quickly in making a big difference in the learning lives of each and every student we serve. This difference, however, will only be made if we work together – across roles, across geographical spaces and across time.

First, let's step back and consider the personal roots of our interest in this work. Both of us come from a long line of teachers. Judy's grandmother taught in rural Scotland. Linda's parents both started their teaching careers in one-room schools in rural Alberta. Part of the strength of small rural schools historically grew out of the necessity of working with large multiage groups. Rural teachers enlisted the help of older children to tutor and coach the younger ones. Creative teachers relied on the expertise within the group of learners to provide as rich a learning experience as possible.

In our own teaching spanning three decades, we have worked in a wide range of schools – urban, rural, suburban, large, small, affluent, and less so. We have seen the struggles and the loneliness of teachers working in isolation. We have also seen the energy generated by compelling ideas and supportive forms of teamwork. On occasion we have observed the negative impact of 'teacher proof' forms of curriculum and rigid adherence to scripted programs. Much more often we have seen the positive learning impact created for struggling learners by the enthusiasm and intellectual teamwork of teachers who are passionate about learning and teaching.

The development of the Network of Performance-Based Schools evolved out of a shared personal and professional desire for teamwork across roles on behalf of learners. The collaborative spirit of our country's earliest and best rural schools can be found in this work. As we examined our own family teaching roots, our experiences in teaching and

leading, our research work with the close to two hundred schools involved in the Network, and our study of international school improvement practices, we have identified five key ideas that we believe can help to inform Canadian school improvement work.

These concepts are evident in schools that approach learning improvement work with a spirit of inquiry, the use of strong formative assessment practices as a daily discipline, respectfully shared and networked forms of leadership, an internal sense of accountability, and a belief in and practice of sustainable improvement.

## Learning Improvement Ideas

*Developing a Reflective Inquiry Focus Matters*

Approaching school improvement with a spirit of reflective inquiry is very different than approaching improvement through the adoption of a specific program or strategy. There is also a difference between developing a question to explore and setting a goal. We believe that the thinking involved in identifying a powerful improvement question creates curiosity and builds commitment in learners of all ages. Kyza and Edelson underline the importance of reflective inquiry by arguing that our educational world is full of ill structured, complex, and interesting questions - and that the pursuit of learning through exploring these challenging questions is motivating.

Network schools are encouraged to develop questions that are right sized, evidence-based, linked, and important in one or more of four initial areas of interest – improving student citizenship, writing, mathematical problem solving, or reading. These initial starting points reflect our experience that a clear inquiry focus in an important learning area helps create both immediate and long-term results while building capacity in the school for lasting learning improvements.

Over time, a reflective inquiry mind set "ripples" out to inform school action research into other areas of learning. Network schools that sustain their work over time are now examining science, active health, oral language, imaginative learning and / or visual, musical or dramatic arts.

*Shared Leadership Must Be a Way of Life*

One of the guiding 'rules' for the Network is that participants metaphorically "leave their formal roles at the door" when they attend meetings. By working as teams across roles, leadership is shifting from one defined primarily by role to one defined much more by contribution and expertise. The research work of Jim Spillane, Alma Harris, and Ann Lieberman is making a significant contribution to the understanding of researchers and practitioners about the importance of developing new frameworks for thinking about distributed leadership at the school level.

We also know from the work of Daniel Muijs and Alma Harris with schools in challenging circumstances in the UK, that teachers working in isolation, no matter how

determined they might be, will not be able to attain lasting learning gains for their most vulnerable learners. If our vulnerable learners are to make genuine gains, then we need educators who are prepared to work as professional teams to serve them and we need to provide intellectual and emotional support for those doing the core work of teaching and learning. Determined staffs working together over time in Network schools have been able to reduce the number of learners in the "not yet" category by half or more. This is an important outcome that encourages the commitment to a more networked style of leadership at both the school and district levels.

*Formative Assessment (Assessment FOR and AS Learning) is a Critical Component of a Learning System*

The work in network schools has been deeply influenced by the research of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam in the UK as well as that of Lorna Earl in Canada. In a recent article, Dylan Wiliam and his co-authors identified a set of broad strategies that are powerful for teachers across content and grade levels. These strategies are: clarifying and sharing learning intentions; co-designing and providing criteria for success; co-designing effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks; providing feedback that moves learners forward; engaging students as the owners of their own learning; and, engaging students as learning and teaching resources for one another. Lorna Earl's extension of formative assessment to the concept of assessment *AS* learning places important emphasis on developing learner confidence and meta-cognition.

Effective teachers using older students as tutors in one-room rural schools were certainly engaging their senior learners as teaching resources for the younger ones. The advantage educators today have is the research-based knowledge of the power of all six strategies working together. We also have access to quality classroom learning criteria developed and used by teams of teachers over many years.

Fundamental to Network learning is the commitment by school teams to use the shared learning criteria to help determine areas of strength and areas requiring focused coaching and instruction. The new challenges to schools are to use the criteria on a regular daily basis to have learners' coach themselves and their fellow learners for improvement, and to include parents more in understanding the connection between assessment and learning

*Strong Internal Accountability Leads to More Thoughtful Public Accountability*

Finding anyone who does not have an opinion about our public schools is difficult. What educators and involved parents find distressing is that the opinions expressed - whether in the media or at social functions - are often long on judgment and short on knowledge. At the same time, the members of the public want and deserve to know that they can be confident in our public institutions – whether it is the safety of our water supply or the effectiveness of our public schools in developing capable future citizens.

Richard Elmore argued that internal accountability by educators is critically important when he stated "high internal agreement is the best defense against uninformed external

pressure." Our observations of Network schools over time support the view that the stronger the internal accountability system (shared assessment measures), the more open schools are to thoughtfully critiquing and making productive use of information from external measures.

We believe that our recent encouragement to schools to share quality criteria with parents provides a focus that is overdue and has important implications both for strengthening internal accountability systems and also for extending parent knowledge about how to encourage their own learners more productively at home.

*Sustainability Must Guide Improvement Efforts*

David Hopkins and David Jackson identified the importance of networks during times of change:

> In the past most school systems have operated almost exclusively through individual units – be they teachers, departments, schools or local agencies. Such isolation may have been appropriate during times of stability but during times of change there is a need to tighten the loose coupling, to increase collaboration and to establish more fluid and responsive structures.

The world we learn, teach and live in is changing rapidly. Many schools have been buffeted by changes in enrollment, in staffing and in leadership. The annual case study reports from Network schools have helped us appreciate the quantity of changes experienced by young people, their families and educators.

Most educators intuitively understand the importance of developing thoughtful initiatives that last long enough to genuinely assist learners in meeting their individual learning and citizenship goals. Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink in their recent book, *Sustainable Leadership*, describe the seven key sustainability concepts:

1. *Depth*, the learning has to matter – and lead to deep understanding;
2. *Endurance*, the learning has to last – and create a deep learning system;
3. *Breadth*, the learning has to spread productively to other areas of learning;
4. *Justice*, the learning has to "do no harm" to the surrounding school environments;
5. *Resourcefulness*, the learning has to draw on the energies of educators without burning them out;
6. *Diversity*, the learning has to simultaneously promote variety, develop quality and at the same time avoid negative forms of standardization; and,
7. *Conservation*, the learning needs to honor the past and use wisdom to create the future.

Internationally, networked learning communities are discovering that these principles of sustainability can be used to guide improvement work. As researchers turn their attention to understanding how networked learning communities work most productively over time, we are seeing new forms of knowledge being generated. In our work we have been able to draw on the research and evaluation knowledge of Lorna Earl and Stephen Katz, Canadian scholars who have been studying the network learning communities in the UK over a three-year period. As part of a pilot study, Network schools were involved with the survey development and instrument testing.

Earl and Katz' examination of networked learning communities has found evidence for seven key features: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, inquiry, leadership, accountability and capacity building and support. Early evidence suggests that schools that sustain their networked inquiries over time make gains in all these areas. Active participation in an external assessment of the work of Network schools has been very helpful in deepening and sustaining the learning for understanding that must be developed - with schools, on behalf of all schools, and all learners - for the long term.

## Conclusion

Unlike our family colleagues who worked alone in small rural schools we feel fortunate that we can do this learning together with the hundreds of interested teachers, parents, vice-principals and principals who are creating a new form of knowledge community in BC. The recent publication by the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol consortium of *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* provides evidence of the growing interest in deepening understanding of formative assessment across provinces and territories. In addition, the work that is being done in many parts of Canada with professional learning communities (the work of Sackney and Mitchell in Saskatchewan and Ontario is one such example) lead us to suggest that there may be interest in extending and sustaining deep learning through connecting networked learning communities across Canada. Based on our experience with the Network schools in BC, we are beginning to imagine what the impact of shared inquiry practices - with focused teamwork across roles and across Canada - might have.

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