



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Submitting as a: -  
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### Summary

After 42 years in South Australian secondary schools—most in senior positions—and with the support of local and overseas studies, I am convinced that efforts to increase student achievement are doomed unless the competence of teachers is enhanced by a determined nation-wide renovation of pedagogic theory.

This paper addresses the role of individual practical theories of teaching and learning in assisting or hindering the development of a school-wide (nation-wide?) drive for educational excellence in Australian schools. It also glances at factors that may obstruct the process and suggests suitable remedies.

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## Main submission

Overcoming the Greatest Barrier to Excellence in Schools

'There is nothing as practical as a good theory.'

Kurt Lewin cited by Eric Sotro (1994, p. vii)

I begin this paper with an anecdote that goes to the core of educational excellence:

Early in retirement, I was invited to introduce Dimensions of Learning to ten of the most interested teachers in a school committed to achieving high standards of learning. Hoping to establish a starting point, I asked those men and women to look back at one of their most successful, recent lessons and identify the teaching principles they had employed. The response startled me. There were mutterings of helplessness and refusal. I coaxed them into some kind of comment; they spoke of establishing good rapport, getting to know their students, and being alert to students' needs. They mentioned only pastoral care issues! Not one of these special people was able on the spot to articulate any pedagogic principle that drove their chosen lesson.

This is a very small sample, but the widely spread judgement that our schools are not doing as well as desired suggests that many teachers would have responded in a similar fashion. It might also indicate that improvement is dependent on teachers having a much better grasp of important principles of teaching. In short, I believe that the greatest barrier to achieving excellence in our schools is the inadequacy of guidelines held by many teachers.

How do teachers approach their work?

Teachers, we say, are supposed to promote student learning. That is their job. Some do it with spectacular success. In USA Bruner, for example, acclaimed the skills of Miss Orcutt, who:

... expressed a sense of wonder that matched, indeed bettered, the sense of wonder I felt at that age (around ten) about everything I turned my mind to, including at the far reach such matters as light from extinguished stars still travelling toward us though their sources had been snuffed out. In effect, she was inviting me to extend my world of wonder to encompass hers. She was not just informing me. She was, rather, negotiating the world of wonder and possibility. (1986, p. 126)

In the United Kingdom, Stenhouse made much the same point:

The improvement of schooling hinges on increasing the number of outstanding teachers ... for it is [they] who transmute the process of instruction into the adventure of education. Others, it is true, may teach us; but it is they who teach us to delight in learning and to exult in the extension of powers learning gives us. (1985, p. 104)

From our vantage point in the twenty-first century, we may well ponder the impact on a knowledge-hungry, wisdom-starved world if, in their schooling, all students met—not one of these outstanding teachers—but many.

The reality is otherwise. Bruner must declare Miss Orcutt a:

... rarity ... a human event, not a transmission device. It is not that my other teachers did not mark their stances. It was rather that their stances were so off-puttingly and barrenly informative. (p. 126)

and Stenhouse observed:

The student who, during the course of ten years in school, meets two or three outstanding and congenial teachers has had a fortunate educational experience. Many are not so lucky. (p. 104)

Indeed, they are not! Many students experience the kind of teaching well described in Elmore's verdict on U.S. teaching—'emotionally flat and intellectually undemanding and unengaging' (1996, p. 5). The difficulty is, he says, that the few outstanding teachers are acknowledged and revered, not so much for their pedagogic knowledge and skill, as for the possession of innate ability, 'an individual trait much like hair color or shoe size, rather than ... a professional norm' (p. 5). He sees a dangerous error in the belief that teachers are born, not made.

Handal and Lauvas (1987) agree. They contend that the strongest determinant of each teacher's approach to student learning is his or her 'practical theory' of teaching, by which they mean 'a person's private, integrated, but ever-changing system of knowledge, experience and values which is relevant to teaching practice at any particular time'. They describe a practical theory as a '... personal construct which is continuously established in the individual through a series of diverse events ... and primarily [functions] as a basis or background against which action must be seen' (1987, p. 10).

While our concentration is—rightly—fixed upon individual teachers, we should also note that sporadic innovation in a few classrooms falls well short of any school-wide enhancement of student learning

It is unkind but probably true to say that many teachers—for a variety of understandable reasons—do not seek an 'ever-changing system of knowledge, experience and values' about their work, and the continuous establishing of their 'personal construct' about teaching is limited and unimaginative. It is not that

innovation requires detailed compliance with a blueprint for teaching—Handy and Aitken (1986) warned that such conformity was unlikely in any profession—but shared commitment to common goals, strategies and language are as important as flair and creativity.

So, if deep, lasting and wide-spread changes to learning are to occur, they will be contingent on equally profound revisions or refreshment of the pedagogy prevailing not only with an occasional teacher but, more importantly, also within entire schools. In turn, such a paradigm shift in teachers' classroom practices will only occur if teachers, both individually and in collaboration with colleagues, are able to reconstruct their accustomed modes of behaviour in the classroom. Students, too, who help shape learning activities in those classrooms, will face a revision of their expectations. One obvious avenue for achieving pedagogic change is to direct ideas and resources towards the pre-service training of teachers. With developments taking place so rapidly, however, it does not seem sufficient to rely solely on generational change. The same initiatives must also be carried into the practice of those already in the schools—teachers and students. So far, pedagogic change of this magnitude seems to have been elusive.

Why?

Because it is a complex and difficult process that is not achieved by the simple distribution of a handbook!

The difficulty of pedagogic change

Pedagogic change requires that a teacher renovates her or his own existing personal practical theory of learning and teaching which has been assembled over time by random events associated with schooling and—we trust—by more or less relevant professional training. The practical theory itself is likely to be highly resistant to alteration.

Coming from a different discipline, but highly relevant to this topic are the words of Francois Jacob who shared with two colleagues the 1965 Nobel Prize in Medicine. Musing on the myriad of factors that influenced his growth over the decades and shaped the person he had become, he wrote in his autobiography:

...I carry within a kind of inner statue, a statue sculpted since childhood, that gives my life a continuity and is the most intimate part of me, the hardest kernel of my character. I have been shaping this statue all my life. I have been constantly retouching, polishing, refining it. (Jacob, 1988, p. 19)

The imagery of 'statue', 'sculpted' and later of 'chisel' and 'gouge' drives home the rock-hard nature of the earlier experiences in life. This probably explains why more recent events or understandings may be confronted in different ways. As Sotto (1994, p. 73) writing about perception, suggests:

- When new principles are the same as the principles inside one's head, one will be able to make sense of them. Change will occur largely through assimilation. People in this category will speak of 'growth', 'development', or 'evolution'.
- When the new principles are completely different from the principles inside one's head, one will usually not be able to make much sense of them. Bewilderment may lead to severe accommodation or to rejection of the new principles. People in this category will probably experience wrenching challenges to self-esteem OR vigorous denial of the new approach.
- When the new principles are slightly different from the principles inside one's head, one will be unsure what one is perceiving—one might even see the things inside one's head! Some in this category may therefore claim easy assimilation or, indeed, no need to change at all. They may, however, be deluded into thinking they are already applying the 'new' ideas while persisting in the old mode.

The last dot point is possibly the greatest risk for competent, experienced workers when their familiar tasks have to be done differently.

Teachers are not immune to human frailty!

In my search for explanations of why genuine efforts to improve student learning in secondary schools are so disappointingly patchy and problematic (Haseloff, 2005), I was granted access to the memoirs of post-graduate trainee teachers who were concluding an intense one-year Diploma of Education course to add to their qualifications. In their papers—carefully crafted for assessment, often exceeding 3,000 words, and candidly discussing personal experiences—I found affirmation of Sotro's claims.

Of the 183 papers that I studied, I found that:

- 82 students reported a steady accumulation of understanding and expertise; these were classified as predominantly assimilators;
- 78 students reported a significant variation of existing beliefs and practices; these were classified as predominantly accommodators;
- 6 students reported an easy transition because of already compatible personal theories; these were classified as predominantly preservers; and
- 17 students clung tenaciously to existing but incompatible personal theories; these were classified as resisters.

The point to be made here is not that the numbers were significant but that managers of pedagogic change should anticipate at least four different reactions to change and plan to deal with each of them in an appropriate way.

SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR PEDAGOGIC CHANGE

New interest in meaningful, student-centred learning sits precariously amidst other calls for teachers to pursue improved test results and to intensify the counselling, caring and behaviour managing aspects of their role. Furthermore, against the centuries-old belief that they merely distributed knowledge, teachers are now expected to promote active learning experiences through which students construct their own understanding. Information gathered in this investigation suggests that a change of such magnitude depends on the application of seven guiding principles:

1. Re-learning. Pedagogic change is best understood as a process of learning to apply new concepts and skills to a familiar routine.
2. Practical theory and collective code. Pedagogic change requires that teachers examine their personal practical theories of learning and teaching, and refine or revise them as necessary. The availability of a convincing alternative theory is crucial. In the secondary context, school-wide improvements in student learning are most likely to be achieved when teachers implement common aims, and apply compatible methodologies.
3. Response to change. For each person involved in change, the process is likely to contain elements of assimilative and accommodative learning, as well as preserving what is valued from the prior theory and resisting some aspects of the new one. It is the preponderance of one or other of these aspects that shapes the nature of the individual response to innovation and determines the individual starting points and modes of travel on the re-learning journey. In any particular innovation, at any time there will probably be groups who are predominantly 'assimilators', 'accommodators', 'preservers' or 'resistors'.
4. New theory in proximate group. Teachers are most likely to succeed in reviewing their existing practical theory and establishing a new collective code, when they work with a trusted mentor (often the head of department) in a small group of close colleagues to examine the new learning theory and to apply it to their own immediate teaching duties.
5. Managing the process. Leaders of change will be most effective when they understand that pedagogic change is a complex learning task that requires differentiated approaches suited to the diverse needs of 'assimilators', 'accommodators', 'preservers' and 'resistors'. The process is likely to extend over several years as the learners pass through the stages of thorough investigation, careful introduction, candid decision making, timely and inclusive implementation, well supported and well sustained consolidation, and evaluation of progress. Moreover, it is not sufficient for change leaders to be thoroughly grounded in the details of the innovation itself. The

prevailing school climate, levels of staff morale, and change strategies developed within the leadership team should be taken into account.

6. Structural and administrative factors, which have the potential to support or impede pedagogic change, deserve careful consideration when the implementation plan is being developed. Heavy workloads may need to be re-assessed and co-curricular responsibilities adjusted for several years.
7. Students. By their enthused engagement with their new learning or their apathy or resistance, students can either intensify or sabotage a change of pedagogy. The innovation strategy should extend to establishing an authentic, informed partnership between students and teachers.

These principles are consistent with the findings of recent decades of research into educational change. Moreover, their insistence on treating change as a process of learning, their focus on learning contexts, and their advocacy of student involvement may have special relevance for Australian secondary schools in the twenty-first century. Perhaps of greatest interest is the realization that each of the seven factors listed above is not merely one element in the process of pedagogic change—it exists in a symbiotic association with the other six and, with them, contributes to their combined effect or, more precisely, their synergy. Ideally, then, a program of pedagogic change would seek to keep all participants and all the relevant issues in harmonious interaction.

#### Some Roadblocks

In lecture theatres and many schools there may exist a small group of beginning or experienced teachers who are well acquainted with the nature of the planned improvement; these people are likely to be valued advocates and leaders of the selected change. There will be, however, a majority of other teachers for whom the process is either an interesting and welcome challenge or a worrying upheaval of previously 'successful' teaching behaviours. To avoid rejection of new approaches, it would be necessary to ensure that items in the following list have been secured:

1. Do not proceed until (a) the school management team, and (b) the heads of subject areas have been thoroughly briefed and are prepared to give full support to the project.
2. Do not allow any other school project to diminish or compete with the project in its early and middle stages.
3. Do not allow any members of the teaching staff to opt out of the project. If any are well acquainted with the proposed change, they should be encouraged to take a supportive and leadership role with their subject colleagues.

4. Do not overload members of staff; many of them will be struggling with the process of changing entrenched teaching habits. Find ways of providing time for regular meetings with project leaders, for informal discussions and sharing ideas with close colleagues, and—especially—for thinking (because change will only take place first in the minds of teachers). Ideally teachers might be released from one of their usual teaching sets, but the costs and the shortage of relief teachers are likely to be insurmountable barriers.
5. Do not forget to include students in the process; make them partners not pawns.
6. Do not forget to also include non-teaching staff, parents and other members of the school's outreach. These people need to understand and broadcast to friends what is happening and why.

### Closing Comments

My study affirmed the belief that educational initiatives which depend on changing teachers' fundamental beliefs and ingrained behaviours begin in the mind of each teacher. Such a process is no mere substitution of one set of principles for another, achieved with the same ease as one might replace an ink cartridge in a printer. It demands complex re-learning, and, perhaps, for more than half of all teachers who participate in this level of change, it will be professionally and personally daunting.

The need for a new pedagogy has been supported by my study of two succeeding schools seeking to be innovative. Interviews indicated that intellectual challenge and excited learning are rarer experiences for secondary students than many would like them to be. A remodelling of student learning is, therefore, necessary. This in turn demands a paradigm shift in teaching. At the moment, such a task will severely tax the resources of any one school, especially as it faces diverse and difficult tasks.

Achieving significant nation-wide changes to pedagogy is a project of giant proportions. It must target both the training of people about to enter the teaching profession and the in-service development of teachers now in the schools and likely to remain there until retirement. This paper proposes guidelines that apply to both sectors, but they are costly in terms of providing the mentors and learning opportunities that ensure change actually happens. We know what to do—help people change their practical theories for doing what they have to do. We know how to achieve this—learn collaboratively through coming to understand how the new theory will work in practice. We know where the change will take hold—within proximate groups in individual schools. It remains to be seen whether governments will take the point that change happens in the minds of people, and then provide the structures and resources essential to individualizing the learning process that brings new knowledge and different skills. Like Popham (2002/2003, p. 83) as he urged his own nation to 'undertake bold NASA-like risks to reform [his] nation's schools', we



should be encouraging and guiding Australian governments as they commit 'sufficient fiscal and human resources' to a powerful national program to revitalize all our schools.