

Thinking about ‘thinking together’: What can career development practitioners learn from the experiences of teachers?



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Most people already know how to work together; however they struggle to ‘think together’. We all know that when people work together there can be all manner of reasons why the outcome may not be successful. However, why is it so difficult for even highly motivated, cooperative professionals to think together?

In the past few years, I have noticed what seems to be a link between teachers’ capacity to think together and their reported levels of career satisfaction. In addition, it also appears that guidance officers and career counsellors (career development practitioners) are very proficient at enabling groups of teachers to think together.

Thinking together is the capacity to collectively develop solutions to shared problems, create new knowledge relevant to a particular context, and develop shared understandings of issues that exceed the understanding of individuals.

In my work as a researcher and consultant in the field of school improvement, I have worked in over 100 schools. My role is to help teachers learn to think together. In doing so, I have come to appreciate that thinking together, while highly complex, is a crucial characteristic of an effective school. Furthermore, I believe that becoming adept at thinking together is an essential characteristic of any organisation that wishes to remain relevant in today’s rapidly changing society. Indeed, Peter Senge (2000) maintains that if you want to improve schools or organisations you should start with looking at the way people interact and think together.

For those of you who work in organisations tasked with re-inventing themselves in times of rapid change, I hope that my reflections stimulate you to think about thinking together. Why is it so important? Why is it so complex? How can it be enabled?

WHY THINK TOGETHER?

Newman and Wehlage (1995) in their research on effective schools and student achievement concluded that:

The most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional communities ... they found a way to channel staff and student efforts toward a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning; they created opportunities for teachers to collaborate and help one another achieve the purpose; and teachers in these schools took collective—not just individual—responsibility for student learning. (p. 3)

Forming professional communities, working collaboratively, developing a shared purpose for student learning, and accepting collective responsibility for student learning constitute very significant challenges for most teachers and school principals. Strange as it may seem, teachers are not used to working in these ways, for in the past teaching has been a relatively isolated profession. Although many teachers work in large organisations surrounded by people, most teachers have gone about the business of teaching, professionally isolated from other teachers. While some teachers have worked together, they rarely had opportunities to think together—especially in the manner that Newman and Wehlage (1995) have advocated.

THINKING TOGETHER VS. WORKING TOGETHER

If you are motivated to do so, it is easy to work together, however thinking together is very difficult even for the most motivated and cooperative professionals. The processes associated with working together and thinking together differ, for when we work together we can distribute tasks, allocate roles and cooperate to make the overall task easier for everyone. Thinking together is not the same, for in thinking

together we are unfamiliar with the outcome or the process of achieving it. In thinking together we are creating something new—not simply following a recipe. Thinking together is the creation of new knowledge. In the case of teachers thinking together for the purposes of school improvement, it includes; rethinking roles, relationships, structures, and challenging assumptions to find better ways to collectively improve outcomes for students.

WHY IS THINKING TOGETHER SO DIFFICULT?

The way in which we enact our various life roles (friend, worker, parent...) is powerfully shaped by our understandings of what these roles entail. Reflect for a moment on the well known story below. It is a powerful but simple way to demonstrate that the manner in which we think about our work determines how we go about our work. Who would you prefer to build your house?

A tourist visiting Italy came across a construction site. What are you doing? he asked the three stonemasons. I am cutting stone, answered the first. I am cutting stone for 1000 lire a day, the second said. I am building a cathedral, said the third. (Anonymous, cited in Socio, 2009, p. 160)

The story is particularly powerful because it demonstrates how the three different workers, each essentially doing the same work, think about their work in different ways. Teachers are no different, for when you talk with them you quickly realise that individual teachers think about their work in different ways. It seems that what they perceive as the most important reason for their work varies from teacher to teacher. For some, the work of the teacher is primarily about nurturing and relationships, others have a passion for a particular discipline (science, history...), while others focus on developing student resilience and determination. There could well be as many different perspectives as there are teachers in the school. These perspectives from which we view our work, I refer to as 'frames of reference'.

Thus, when tasked with thinking together about ways to 'improve student learning', the first teacher will think primarily about relationships and how to improve them; the second teacher will think more about how to improve understanding of a particular discipline; while the third will give much

thought to increasing student resilience and determination. While each of the teachers is thinking about something that is relevant and educationally sound, the main point to be made here is that they will struggle to collectively address the 'common challenge of improving student learning' if they are thinking about different things.

I acknowledge that while we all think about a myriad of different things each day; we tend to think more about those issues which we believe are most important. Because we have different frames of reference we often struggle to work together, for all too frequently we fail to acknowledge, or understand, or incorporate alternative frames into our understandings. Essentially, if we cannot appreciate/understand/recognise some other frames of reference it is impossible to 'make collective sense' or develop a 'collective understanding' of the issue in question. We've all had the experience where the group discussed the issue ad-infinitum, never seeming to move forward, becoming increasingly frustrated with their inability to resolve the issue.

However there are times when the opposite occurs, for sometimes we can work together and see problems/issues from alternative perspectives, thus collectively gaining a more enlightened view of the issue at hand. It seems that sometimes when people work together a 'collective frame of reference' is developed and that this collective frame of reference enables individuals to not only make the link between their own individual frames of reference, but also to the frames of reference of others. When this happens we are able to develop a greater appreciation of the issue, understand connections of which we had previously been unaware, and develop a much more holistic understanding of the issue. Thus our collective understanding is more than the sum of all the parts. It is the moment when 'it all fits together'—'the lights go on' and we all see the solution that had for so long eluded us.



It is when these 'breakthrough moments' happen that we know we have successfully created something new as a consequence of thinking together.

ENABLING THINKING TOGETHER: A SPECIAL ROLE FOR THE CAREER PRACTITIONER

When school communities are able to successfully think together, they are better able to respond to challenges and in doing so build organisational capacity for sustained improvement. In schools it can contribute to improved teaching and enhanced outcomes for students (Crowther & Associates, 2011).

Senge (2000) explains that team learning [what I have referred to as thinking together] is best achieved through processes of dialogue, explaining that:

During the dialogue process, people learn how to think together—not just in the sense of analysing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions and the resulting actions belong not only to one individual, but to all of them. (p. 75)

Dialogue is a special form of conversation that is inclusive and respectful, it acknowledges all members in the group as having useful input, it encourages participants to listen, not only to what is said, but how it is said. It requires participants to be comfortable with silence and suspend their judgements. Members should feel safe to speak. It is non-adversarial and seeks to enable participants to connect the pieces and make meaning of what emerges.

Those who facilitate dialogue should have a keen understanding of people and be able to ensure that participants feel valued and safe. Accordingly, in schools, I have noticed that career development practitioners tend to be highly successful in the facilitation role. While their 'people skills' are a key characteristic, so too is their capacity to contribute alternative frames of reference. Because of the nature of their work, career development practitioners tend to have humanistic/whole person/student-centred frames of reference, which seem to be particularly useful in helping teachers make meaning and think together.

It seems that career development practitioners can enhance organisational

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