

WAYS OF ORIENTING SECONDARY SCHOOLS TO BECOMING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

This paper focuses on work carried out over the past two years at the Australian Council for Educational Research for a project entitled: Improving the Foundations for Lifelong Learning in Secondary Schools. Lifelong learning at secondary school level in particular is concerned with keeping students engaged in learning at school and developing in students those characteristics that will make learning an integral part of their lives when they leave school. To a large extent this involves developing the idea of schools as learning communities. The research is underpinned by an exploration of issues through the extensive literature on lifelong learning [Bryce, et al, 2000] and through case study work with seven secondary schools in South Australia and Victoria. The schools were selected for their interest in lifelong learning, but they are at different stages of developing and implementing policies and practices on the journey to becoming 'learning communities'.

It is important to acknowledge that all schools are learning communities of some kind. Becoming a learning community oriented to lifelong learning does not require complete or radical change. The process must be gradual, building on elements that are already established in a school. We have found it useful to view the process of orientation to lifelong learning as a journey [Longworth, 1999].

This paper will discuss:

- the characteristics of secondary schools that are lifelong learning communities;
- the characteristics of secondary school students involved in lifelong learning communities;
- some factors that militate against schools becoming lifelong learning communities;

- the process of orienting a school towards becoming a lifelong learning community.

Characteristics of secondary schools that are lifelong learning communities

Each of the case study schools we visited had its own particular way of approaching lifelong learning. One catholic school demonstrated that its integral philosophy of mercy is lifelong learning, as the students leave the school with a belief that they will learn, explore the world and grow throughout their lives. Another school was particularly keen to develop every student's self esteem so that every student felt that the school cared about his or her development and took interest in the pathways planned for life after school. Other schools approached lifelong learning in terms of making the school a focus for learning in the local community and thus removing barriers between the school and life outside.

There is no recipe for becoming a lifelong learning community, but three main characteristics noted by Longworth [1999] are apparent. Schools with an orientation to lifelong learning:

- view the learner and the learner's needs as central;
- emphasise self-directed learning and associated with this – metacognition, learning to learn;
- take a long-term view of learning that encompasses the life cycle.

Schools view the learner and learner's needs as central

Some case study schools had a 'seamless' approach to curriculum, both in terms of fluidity between the school and the community and also in terms of a vertical rather than horizontal organisation of curriculum. In one school there was a 'Year 7' group (first year of secondary school) for one semester, then students selected studies which they undertook together with students in Years 8 to 10. Several schools had some kind of 'Learning Centre'. Sometimes this had grown from a place to which students with difficulties had been 'withdrawn' for 'remedial' work, and had become a place where students at all year levels could choose to go for help or just for a comfortable place to study.

One of the most important characteristics of a lifelong learning community is that assessment is not competitive and students are not labelled. It is therefore possible to be open about one's need for help. In a perfect lifelong learning community there is no fear of failure. Splitter and Sharp [1995] have emphasised the importance of students being able to take risks; being able to

ask questions without being laughed at. There is no longer any stigma about needing special help – indeed understanding one's needs is acknowledged as a significant part of the learning process.

In a lifelong learning community teachers are model learners. They are facilitators or mentors rather than dispensers of knowledge. They aim to help students to learn, rather than to 'fill' them with content. In their roles as model learners, these teachers can be open about their own lack of knowledge.

These characteristics are easy to articulate but very much more difficult to implement – particularly for teachers who have been practising for some years. Many teachers practising today were trained to believe that teaching involves 'putting on a performance' in front of a class. Secondary school teachers are used to being regarded as authorities in particular fields and are thus reluctant to admit lack of knowledge in their field. To do so undermines their authority.

Schools that are communities of lifelong learning give considerable support to their teachers. They show that they value their teachers by providing comfortable amenities for them. A significant part of the budget is set aside for professional development activities. At one case study school every teacher has an interview with the principal each year, the purpose of which is to discuss their career path – what new challenges they would like, their learning needs, whether goals set the previous year have been achieved. The principal is a mentor.

Another school visited made a point of celebrating the work of the teachers. There were frequent 'twilight seminars' where teachers' work was showcased. At this school there is a system of mentoring and encouragement to work collaboratively.

A feature of schools that are lifelong learning communities is their pastoral care. In some cases there is an extensive program – sometimes involving senior students helping younger ones. In some cases it is just a sense of caring that pervades a school. In one case study school a careers teacher heard that a former student (who had left school more than a year ago) had dropped out of an apprenticeship. There was considerable concern, which involved the principal counselling the former student and another teacher visiting the student at home. The school felt a responsibility to help the young person consider his options and re-evaluate his career pathway even though he had not been a student at the school for some time.

Many of these changes are just different orientations, made possible by a shift in attitude:

- people (both teachers and students) are not labelled or classified, they are appreciated for their own special qualities;
- to not know something is an opportunity for further exploration, rather than an opportunity for criticism;
- every student (and teacher) is equally important – students who would have once been described as ‘weak academically’ are valued as much as those who intend to study Law or Medicine.

Schools emphasise self-directed learning and associated with this – metacognition, learning to learn

As mentioned above, a major orientation in a lifelong learning school is a focus on helping a student to learn rather than ‘filling’ a student with content. Most students need to be given explicit help on how to learn. It is important for students to think well of themselves so that they have a positive approach to learning. This is assisted through many of the activities mentioned above, such as not labelling students (particularly not labelling them as ‘failures’) and having a strong caring orientation.

One way of helping students to learn how to learn is to encourage them to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and to acknowledge that there are many different styles of learning. At one of the case study schools students were surveyed to find out their strengths and weaknesses by means of a framework based on Howard Gardner’s work [1993]. Students shared the outcomes of the survey and were encouraged to make use of this knowledge, for example, when working in groups. One of the case study schools bases learning to learn on the Quality Learning Program developed by the Australian Quality Council. The key words are: plan, do, study, act. Students are actively involved in all aspects of learning, not just in producing work according to a teacher’s plan.

Thus students are encouraged to reflect and to know themselves – their strengths, weaknesses, learning styles. They are encouraged to have confidence about themselves. In addition to this, in a lifelong learning community students are given specific help in setting their learning goals and planning their learning. This includes help in setting realistic targets. Most students learn better in an atmosphere where learning is fun.

Schools that are lifelong learning communities place emphasis on helping students to develop certain generic skills. One of overarching importance is information literacy. Students learn how they can best handle information in

light of their knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses. Students explore information independently and with guidance from teachers. They are aware of multiple sources of information – telephone conversations and interviews as well as printed and electronic material. In most lifelong learning communities there is considerable use of the Internet, but ‘information literacy’ encapsulates a great deal more than ‘information technology’. As well as collecting, analysing and organising information from multiple sources it includes the ability to pose appropriate questions – to interrogate the information and, most importantly, to evaluate the information.

In several of the case study schools the Library or Resources Centre assumed a particularly important role and the staff of the centre played an important part in helping students acquire information literacy skills. For example, in one school there were pamphlets developed by Resources Centre staff on how to evaluate the authenticity of a website.

Many other important generic skills stem from developing information literacy, for example, problem-solving skills. This may involve tracking down information to investigate a particular issue, or it may be of a more divergent nature involving creativity and experimentation. A lifelong learning community acknowledges that much learning arises from interaction with others, from working collaboratively. Students are helped to develop communication skills; to express themselves clearly – get a point across – and to listen to others. Students are also encouraged to work independently and to reflect. In one case study school reflection and self evaluation were assisted by having each student keep a diary which was discussed on a regular basis in a one-to-one mentoring situation.

Schools take a long-term view of learning that encompasses the life cycle

Again, the approach in a school that is lifelong learning community is one of different orientation rather than radical change. These schools assist students to develop metacognitive skills not for a short-term extrinsic reward – such as a high ‘ENTER’ score – but with a long-term view; that these skills will be used throughout life. This view is reinforced by teachers viewing themselves as lifelong learners.

Characteristics of secondary school students involved in lifelong learning communities

One of the outstanding characteristics of students in a school that is a lifelong learning community is curiosity. Rather than an attitude of ‘is this enough to pass’, these students want to pursue a topic as far as possible and from every

angle. They have (or are developing) what has been termed 'helicopter vision' [Candy, 1994] which means that they have a broad vision and make links across curriculum areas.

In an ideal lifelong learning school every student is important, and every student feels important. Students have positive pictures of themselves as learners no matter whether they are aiming to do Medicine at university or whether they dislike academic subjects and are unsure of what they want to do when they leave school. Students gain confidence from various social interactions at school, such as participation in the Student Representative Council, or taking part in sports or school productions.

Students are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They plan and evaluate their progress in light of this knowledge.

Students have long-term plans. They talk about career pathways. At one case study school students had the freedom to try out certain areas of work knowing that they could return to the school for further guidance until they found the 'right' path. This was facilitated by a close link between the school and the local community and many opportunities for blending work experiences and VET with the school program.

In a lifelong learning school students are encouraged to be adaptable and flexible. These qualities are considered to be important for the future where, with ready and rapid access to new knowledge, workplaces and other aspects of life are changing constantly.

Some factors that militate against schools becoming lifelong learning communities

Some of the fundamental elements of a lifelong learning school rely on the attitudes of teachers and parents. A lot of teachers are under stress with heavy workloads and responsibilities of shepherding students through end of school certification. The idea of espousing a new kind of approach to their teaching can be very threatening.

Many parents have an expectation that their children's school experiences will be very much like their own – with imposed discipline, mainly summative assessment and teachers who are remote figures of authority. A lifelong learning approach requires that these perceptions be changed because it is important that the whole school community is involved. Thus the development of a lifelong learning community cannot work without the support of teachers and parents. As noted above, teachers themselves need to

be model lifelong learners and to see their role as being mentors to students rather than figures of authority who control students' learning.

A significant hindrance to lifelong learning is the present system of end of school certification. The curriculum of most Australian secondary schools is influenced by these requirements. In many schools students start undertaking essays or projects in Years 8 and 9 in order to practise the kinds of investigative work required in Year 11. Around Year 10 students 'start to work', in preparation for the 'hard work' in Years 11 and 12. In an ideal lifelong learning school, students work hard because they enjoy pursuing a particular topic, not because of an imposed work requirement.

The influence of Year 11 and 12 certification is not entirely bad, but in many cases it encourages a competitive, more superficial approach to learning: 'What can I do well in?', 'How much do I have to know?', rather than 'What do I need to learn?' 'Where do I go from here?'. In particular, the competitive nature of end of school certification:

- moves the ownership of learning away from the individual learner's specific needs to a situation where content is tightly specified by an 'authority';
- makes the goal of learning relatively short-term, and often the goal is a grade or score, rather than something long-term and intrinsically satisfying;
- classifies some people as 'failures', which is one of the strongest deterrents to learning;
- forces students to learn (or produce material) according to a specified time-line rather than according to individual needs.

If assessment outcomes are 'narrowly conceived' [Russell, 2000], they will not measure those aspects of lifelong learning that are most valued. It is difficult for students and teachers to place emphasis on elements of learning that are not valued by the school system, or, perhaps more accurately, it is difficult to devote oneself to an approach that offers long-term intrinsic rewards in an environment that emphasises short-term extrinsic rewards.

Why do a majority of young people need to undertake the same Year 11/12 examination and receive an ENTER or TER score? Why not focus on more flexible, and potentially more formative kinds of assessment such as portfolios of work that could celebrate the completion of secondary schooling? Why not confine entrance selection testing to the higher education institutions, for those students who are specifically interested in undertaking higher education? Given that knowledge is changing rapidly, it is probably

more useful for higher education institutions to test generic skills, such as thinking skills rather than examinations based on particular areas of content.

If all secondary school students in Australia are to have the opportunity of engaging with learning in the rich environment of a school that is a lifelong learning community, there will need to be radical change to the system of secondary school certification.

The process of orienting a school towards becoming a lifelong learning community

The main advice about changing a traditional secondary school into a lifelong learning community is to aim to do it gradually. It is most important to build on existing features of the school rather than to introduce the idea of lifelong learning as something completely new.







One of the South Australian case study schools was just starting the process of orienting to lifelong learning. The principal had come recently from another school that was involved in the South Australian 'Learning to Learn' program and was very keen to orient the school in this way. But he was well aware that it must be done slowly, otherwise teachers would become anxious (yet another change) and parents mistrustful.

This principal started to encourage teachers to think about the philosophy of lifelong learning by circulating short 'pithy' papers for their comment. Teachers were encouraged to keep a log of their professional reading (and the pithy papers were professional reading). In South Australia, teachers who undertake 35 hours of professional development in a year are able to finish teaching some days before the official end of the school year. This provided an incentive for reading the principal's papers.

The school has a number of features that will form a good basis for lifelong learning. In particular there is a Learning Centre where students can go for assistance at almost any time. There is a very strong pastoral program. This strong sense of caring in the school coupled with the provision of VET programs makes school more meaningful for some students who would otherwise leave in Year 10 or 11.

The table below is based on the work of Longworth [1999]. It outlines some of the changes in orientation needed for a school to become a lifelong learning community. The questions may form a useful basis for professional development discussions.

The Journey to Lifelong Learning

Ownership of the need to learn and its content is with the teacher.		As far as possible ownership of the need to learn and its content is given to individuals.
Education is compartmentalised according to age and subject.		Learning is lifelong in concept and content, there are links vertically and horizontally between age groups.
Learning is about what to think.		Learning is about how to think.
Teachers are dispensers of knowledge.		Teachers are mentors and models of lifelong learning.
Failures are separated from successes.		Emphasis is on progress and encouragement of further learning.
Learning is a difficult chore and is about received wisdom.		Learning is fun, participative and involving.

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