Innovating together: Collaborative teacher research as school-based problem solving

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The era in which we live is one of discontinuous change, punctuated by brief periods of relative equilibrium. The volume, pace and degree of change is easily recognised by people in the alterations to the social, economic, technological and political touchstones familiar in their lives. Organisations, including schools and education systems, face the complexity of interpreting their operating environments and creating the internal conditions necessary for successful interaction, while simultaneously accommodating the individual reactions to change within their organisations. The challenges inherent in dealing with change means that individuals and organisations are searching for improved ways of dealing with change on an ongoing basis. Collaborative inquiry that seeks to deal both with issues of importance within organisations, and to develop a culture where such activities are valued as an integral part of professional life is one way of increasing the individual's ability to understand and influence changing circumstances and enhancing the ability of the organisation to continually innovate. This paper examines the development of such a culture within one 'Roundtable' that was part of the Innovative Links Project between 1993 and 1996.

The ACIIC (Australian Centre for Innovation and International Competitiveness), University of Sydney, South Coast NSW Roundtable was one of sixteen Roundtables established under the auspices of the Innovative Links Project for Teacher Professional Development (ILP) and Federally funded through the National Professional Development Program (NPDP). The Roundtable was funded to facilitate work organisation research and reform in member schools in an attempt to better understand and improve student learning outcomes. The Roundtable comprised a broad range of education stakeholders; they being representatives from the NSW Department of School Education (DSE), the independent non-government school sector, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), the National Schools Network (NSW), together with the Convenor (the author) from ACIIC, University of Sydney.

The Innovative Links Project, which was spawned from work of the National Schools Network, was an important development in the initiation and management of change in Australian education. What was special about the nature and design of the Innovative Links Project was the fact that it was a partnership between employers, unions and government, at one level, and the teaching profession and universities, at another, to provide top-level support for bottom-up change. It was an active attempt to create a culture of collaborative inquiry to improve the professional ability of teachers to enhance the learning outcomes of students. The project enhanced the ability of teachers to work together to develop shared professional understandings about the educational capabilities of their students, and the nature of the world into which they would enter as a way of rethinking the organisational, curriculum and resourcing parameters within the school.

The decisions on what to change and how to change were made within the school by practising teachers. The schools, teachers and university partners were guided by the objectives, framework and methodology of the project. The top-level support of the employers, unions and government contributed to give the school-based activities of the Innovative Links Project a sense of legitimacy, as well as the resources to undertake these activities. The derivation of the change project from within the school allowed an immediacy
and reality to the project focus. Together with the Roundtable structure of the Innovative Links Project, and the use of its Action Research methodology, participants were able to develop the requisite competence, commitment and ownership to enact change that influenced the quality of teaching and learning in the school.

Yeatman and Sachs commented that the Innovative Links Project was new and significant in that it:

- designed and developed to overcome teacher isolation via whole-school professional development based upon on-going school-based learning communities and professional conversation;
- developed a formal partnership relationship between school-based colleagues and university-based colleagues to foster the professional development of each partner; and
- is of a scale that is of system-wide impact and significance (1995, p. 1).

School-based professional development through collaborative inquiry was at the heart of this partnership and as such the ILP was of 'considerable strategic importance for the development of an industry-based teacher education and school-based professional development.' (Yeatman & Sachs, p. 5) They concluded that the nature and design of the ILP allowed all participants to move beyond their normal thinking, relationships and practices, and that all involved had been 'extraordinarily courageous and cooperative in their willingness to try out new practices and new relationships' (Yeatman & Sachs, p. 12).

The schools that made up the Roundtable were Bega West Public School, Braidwood Central School, The Illawarra Senior College, The Illawarra Grammar School (TIGS) and Monaro High School.¹ The make-up of schools reflected the desire of the government funding agency that the 80%-20% demographic between public and private schooling that exists in Australia be constituted within the Roundtable.

Public schools from the NSW DSE were selected by a tendering process after the project was advertised throughout the South Coast Region of the DSE. The selection of the DSE schools involved an active partnership between the Roundtable Convenor, the then Assistant Director-General of Education for South Coast Region and the Illawarra Regional Organiser of the NSWTF. This demonstration of partnership endured and formed the basis of the culture of the Roundtable. The twenty-seven proposals for Roundtable membership were reduced by this interim Steering Committee to the selected four. The independent sector school was invited to apply based upon their on-going professional relationship with the Roundtable Convenor.

Although the member schools were drawn from geographically dispersed locations, strong thematic links in project orientation created a commonality between the majority of members of the Roundtable. Three of the schools—Monaro, TIGS and Braidwood—explored the issues, concepts and organisation of the middle years of schooling (years 5-8), while Bega West initiated reforms in school structure and teacher work organisation to enhance exit outcomes. The Illawarra Senior College undertook the 'Flying Start' program for mature 'second chance' learners as part of the overall reformation of the former Port Kembla High School as an institution offering academic and vocational learning to senior secondary students.

Every effort was made to instigate and develop the ethos of the Roundtable in such a way that the members of the Roundtable felt that they collectively owned the processes and activities of the Roundtable. Such ownership and empowerment is not merely the stuff of management theory and rhetoric, but was enacted in the behaviours exhibited by the Convenor and the schools toward each other. It was as such a genuine attempt to bring congruence to the participants’ understanding of this unique set of professional relationships, through a solid alignment of the rhetoric of the Innovative Links Project and the reality of developing a dynamic Roundtable culture and partnership.

Acknowledgment of the professionalism, experience and intelligence of the Roundtable stakeholders was reflected in attitude and behaviour, so as to reduce the possibility of a paternalistic power relationship between the university and the school stakeholders. Concurrently, prompt attention was given to the needs of stakeholders so as to create a climate of mutual respect. This was essential in the development of the research projects in the schools, and collaborative professional culture and relationships within the Roundtable.

The research element of the Innovative Links Project was one of its crucial defining features. The objectives of the project called for the development of ‘schools as learning communities where research, rethinking and renewal are regarded as normal and essential work practices.’ Research in the ILP aimed to develop a shared understanding of the issues impacting upon school effectiveness to enhance both teacher competence and the learning of all students.

The development of such a research base in the ILP, and the teaching profession as a whole, is important not only to the development of the education, but to Australia as a nation. The development of teachers well versed in working together to investigate the influence of school policy and organisation upon student learning will hopefully lead to schools that better meet the learning needs of students. Students who have achieved better learning outcomes enhance the total level of skill and knowledge within the community and contribute to the vitality of Australian society and its economy. This is crucial as Australians grapple with the nature of change within our society and internationally.

The Roundtable operated through a process of ‘innovating together’ in an attempt to jointly create the future of educational practice within the member schools. The convenor played the role of ‘critical friend’, supporting, listening, questioning and clarifying relevant issues with the school-based colleagues. Schools determined their research thrust and the process was jointly shaped to fit the needs of the school communities. This policy of mutual respect and consensus was used to display confidence in teacher professionalism. Such confidence was rewarded many times over in the efforts and insights generated both within the schools and at the Roundtable level by the school-based colleagues.

The complexity and interrelatedness of issues, coupled with the rapidity of change in the late twentieth century, mean that it is difficult for any one person or group to have a monopoly on the truth. The development of collaborative inquiry offers a way of allowing all organisations, including schools, an effective way of aligning their internal values, philosophies, structures and operations through an aggregated perception of what constitutes external reality. The methodology of teacher research within the Innovative Links Project offered a working example of how this can be carried out to enhance both the effectiveness of the school and the professionalism of teachers. In undertaking this they created an improved ability in their schools to serve their communities. What we may learn from them

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2 Agreement between Commonwealth of Australia and National Teaching and Learning Consortium concerning ILP in Yeatman and Sachs. op. cit. 1995. p 71
offers a considerable opportunity for guidance in the search for what it is to be a professional in a complex and rapidly changing world.

The potential for the research efforts of teachers to create a new form of practice in education is real, yet it is a form of professional behaviour that remains rather unusual in the majority of Australian schools. Systematic collaborative inquiry by teachers is not often a part of the normal work in schools, and as such the insights offered by teacher research may not always be taken seriously by other professionals in the education industry (practitioners, academics and policy-makers).

Teachers are capable of conducting worthwhile investigation. However, the fact remains that teachers are generally unpractised in research. In a normal school there is most often not the time to carry out research. Teachers are extraordinarily busy responding to the ever increasing demands that students, systems, parents, communities and their own schools place upon them. However, the use of collaborative inquiry, when afforded time and resources, in a supportive school culture, offers much in assisting teachers to cope with the demands placed upon them. This is demonstrated very strongly in the ACIIC–South Coast NSW Roundtable schools. Research, as carried out by these teachers, aimed to create change that directly related to the central activity of the school; teaching and learning.

Practitioner inquiry through Action Research produced new knowledge about educational conditions within schools, and in doing so built confidence and acceptance among teachers for positive action to improve these conditions. It was a tonic to the reactive intensity of daily life in Roundtable schools where the opportunities for teachers to meet to research, converse and reflect were highly prized moments that informed and guided teachers as they relentlessly prepared to teach their next class. As such, it is the development of the ability to integrate such insights as a basis for future action, both individually and organisationally, in an intense environment that appears the hallmark of a new or enhanced teacher professionalism.

Teachers in the Roundtable faced considerable challenges to their own professional paradigm when seeking to develop a reflective practice and a collaborative culture in a working environment where they make hundreds of adaptive, reactive decisions in the course of a normal teaching day. The establishment of such a desirable professional state is made more problematic when we consider the human difficulty involved in setting aside first impressions, past experiences and personal opinions to create a situation where the considered questioning of existing custom and practice is actively countenanced. It is here that the ILP with the provision of school-based research funding, and a reflective culture at the Roundtable level offered a way for school reform driven by collegiality and collaboration.

We live in a society that is constantly changing, yet our ability as a society to understand, direct and harness the forces of change is imperfect. The Innovative Links Project was an initiative that sought to develop the skills within all participating schools to proactively deal with change as a community to allow for the development of solutions appropriate to their contexts. While the Innovative Links Project and the Roundtable were successful in creating a network and a process to support such change it does not mean that the process of change within schools was simple and easy. Fullan has commented:

It is so easy to underestimate the complexities of the change process...Change is riddled with dilemma, ambivalence and paradox...Educational change is above all a very personal experience in a social, but often impersonal setting...There are no short-cuts, and there is no substitute for directly engaging in improvement projects with others. Like most complex
endeavours in order to get better at change we have to practice it on purpose...Acting on change is an exercise in pursuing meaning. Selected educational reform that takes individual meaning and development seriously not only stands a better chance of being implemented; it offers some hope for combating the stagnation, burnout, and cynicism of those in schools...(Fullan 1991, pp.350-1).

The change process is about creation of new ideas, practices and structures. Where the new replaces rather than complements the existing paradigm, change is also about loss and the possibility of conflict. Individuals build up a degree of order and predictability in their lives based upon past experiences and existing (historically derived) custom and practice. This enables them to construct professional and personal meaning. Organisations develop cultures that can promote or stifle new ideas. Systems develop priorities and frameworks that can accentuate or impede the initiation of change at the individual and organisational levels. As change operates in a complex fashion its significance is likely to be variable, even in a project such as the ILP that sought to sustain change through its creation and support at the ‘chalk face’.

The work of the Roundtable offered a range of different experiences in enacting change, yet these experiences were made common through the framework and methodology of the project. This strength partly lay in the combination of the Action Research methodology as a way of encouraging both change and reflection, and the innovation of the Roundtable as a technology. The Roundtable as a medium was very powerful. It stimulated thinking, it supported action through the problems of change investigation and implementation. It simultaneously encouraged inquiry and reflection. The combination of these two technologies help to initiate and sustain change in a culture that encouraged debate, questioning, inclusion and open-ended searching. It remains seemingly the antithesis of much other policy-induced change in education that seeks to measure results before the change has been implemented, understood and accepted within the patterns of relationships that are the school.

As a facilitator of change, the Innovative Links Project:

- professionally empowered teachers through the top-level support for school-based change;
- very effectively focused the attention for change on the core activity of the school, teaching and learning, thus improving school effectiveness;
- offered an effective infrastructure to allow for an improved understanding of change and how it can be managed;
- enhanced the professional development of participants;
- developed a reasonably cohesive vision of the future through collaborative action in the school; and
- used limited resources wisely to effect change that impacted upon classroom practice.

Throughout its three year life the Roundtable achieved a dynamism and vitality that gave its participants a greater sense of esteem and professionalism in their roles as teachers. It allowed them to question personal (and school cultural) assumptions concerning educational philosophy and practice, within a supportive environment. Importantly, research skills to investigate and change education practice and structure within their schools was also
developed. Association with the Innovative Links Project and the development of a collaborative Roundtable culture has allowed these school communities to attempt to build consensus around significant local issues and to take action with greater confidence.

Involvement in the Innovative Links Roundtable generated benefits for the schools and teachers involved. The sharing of ideas and experiences helped to fuel the enthusiasm and commitment of the participants. The Innovative Links created a real feeling that Roundtable members were contributing not only to the education of their students and their own professional development, but to a movement in school reform with the potential to make a serious contribution both within Australia and internationally.

The feeling of being 'plugged into' something larger than the sum of its parts was itself an achievement as it created a broader frame of reference for the exploration of educational assumptions and practices. Roundtable stakeholders actively learned through their interaction with school-based team members, Roundtable members and members of the broader Innovative Links structure. This led to honest reflection, improved teacher esteem and professionalism, and the opportunity for enhanced learning experiences for students. The power and potential of the Roundtable and the Innovative Links in reducing isolation, challenging mindsets, and prompting new thinking and actions should not be underestimated.

While we feel that the ACIIC–South Coast Roundtable was a success, considerable challenges remain in building our knowledge of the relationships between teachers' work and student learning, and in communicating this to a broader audience. The broader audience is both within the Roundtable and external to it. Staff members, both new and old within Roundtable schools who were not fully acquainted with the work of the Roundtable team members in their own school environments have had to be actively brought into the process. Additionally, some key Roundtablers have moved on to new schools and have begun to set in place the elements of collaborative inquiry in their new schools.

There are real challenges to ensure that our work is sustainable into the future, yet the power of the culture of the Roundtable was such that it is a real possibility that our work and its legacies will endure, despite the loss of specific funding for its continuation. The ability and energy demonstrated by all members of the ACIIC–South Coast Roundtable leaves us secure in the knowledge that through professional collaboration and exploration we can make an educational difference in the lives of our students; better preparing them for a changing future.

REFERENCES


