USING NETWORKS TO BUILD PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

By: Brett Speed

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Why is networking important?

My networking skills have continued to expand from my time as a graduate teacher living in rural Victoria to an aspiring leader. I engaged in professional development, team teaching opportunities with level leaders and experienced staff, discussing growth points, programs and my own personal journey, whilst developing strong links with like-minded people across the state. I have worked in a variety of settings: a mid-sized country school with sporting prowess; a large high performing academic school in the outer suburbs; an affluent international school; a large school with strong leadership and a great restorative culture. All of these opportunities have provided platforms for internal and external networking – through collaborative team-based planning, professional development for aspiring leaders, and network meetings.

These are the kinds of forums that provide opportunities to build networks, provided we step out of our comfort zone and engage in conversations with those around us, both professional and personal. Seeing a familiar face outside of school consolidating on learning is pleasing and allows for reconnection and seeing what experiences others have engaged in since last connecting.

Within our education system, there is high importance placed on networks and relationships within the work place. This is evident in Practice Principle 7, action 7.4 where teachers challenge and support each other to improve practice. We have daily interactions with leaders, teaching colleagues, administration, parents and students. These relationships, or networks, provide us with avenues to connect, relate and explore daily across a multitude of platforms and develop ourselves further as educators. Having strong networks allows us the opportunity to gain incidental professional development whilst also addressing school focused goals (such as an Annual Implementation Plan) or personal foci (such as a Professional Development Plan or VIT Portfolio), identify the similarities and differences between work places, and gain sounding boards for the discussion of problem issues and solutions. Networks provide ideas for classroom tasks and investigations; they are shared and effective professional development; and they

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promote policy development through professional discussions. Working collaboratively with others builds teacher capacity around DET initiatives including HITS (High Impact Teaching Strategies) and the FISO model (Framework for Improving Student Outcomes).

Networking with the school community

Leaders and mentors

Regular networking with leaders is the best way to identify best practice in the school and ensure you are maintaining the correct structures within the school whilst also building your own teaching capacity. These professional conversations can be both formal and informal. Collaborative team teaching sessions, collegiate observations or discussions in Professional Learning Communities continue to build on existing networks and frame personal and student growth in the school, whilst strengthening relationships and networks school-wide.

Teachers

Teaching colleagues are the most valuable source of information within your school and the people that you need to connect with the most. They are your day-to-day companions who will support you, assist in building skills, and provide relief from the daily pressure. Break times are some of the most important times to check in with people, so make sure you are frequently visiting the common areas. There is a plethora of work to do, but relationships are an essential component of our success within schools.

Other graduate teachers

It is important to connect with other graduate teachers on a regular basis to share experiences and build on your professional knowledge. Engaging with early career staff in your school, network or state is an effective way to discuss common needs. It is particularly important if there are no other graduates at your school. (For more information on networking with graduate teachers, see Lara Schendzielorz's article in Edition 3 of the Graduate Teacher Learning Series 'Who is available to support you in your work?')

In Term 3 the Graduate Teacher Conferences are taking place around Victoria. These are an opportunity to connect with other graduates and build professional knowledge. (For more information and registration details please click on this link http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/profdev/Pages/induction.aspx.)

Parents and carers`

In relation to parents, networking means sharing relevant information on the development of their child and how they can assist your educational program. Creating healthy networks with parents on a professional level and sharing the learning journey provides another support system for you when you encounter challenges with the child. Relationships here are key, as parents are one of the major

stakeholders. Ensure you have relevant and consistent discussions with your leaders at school for best practice in building these relationships.

Students

Fostering positive inclusive relationships with students is paramount to successful teaching and learning. Building positive and productive learning environments is the first step, highlighting clear and high expectations within the classroom. Student input is critical, fostering a sense of ownership from all parties, whilst also investing in the relationships between teachers and students. This in turn allows educators to foster inclusive behaviours and differentiated teaching, and provide an environment where the learner feels valued and heard. Creating learning opportunities that follow the *gradual release of responsibility* model allows student voice and agency to impact on the learning in the classroom. This in turn creates more driven and passionate learners, whilst making a more productive, engaging and positive classroom climate. *Amplify* provides valuable resources, including a host of documentation and case studies, which can be used to build a framework for incorporating and developing student voice and agency.

Networking opportunities

Professional development in your first year

Opportunities to attend formal out-of-school professional development sessions are often limited for graduate teachers (although graduate teacher conferences are one option). If you do get the opportunity, consider it both a networking and a learning opportunity. At these events, you will have the opportunity to network with like-minded professionals outside your own school. This may provide an opportunity to engage in conversations with other graduates, experienced staff or leaders and further develop your own skills personally and professionally. Remember to promote the positive things about your school during this time.

There are times when several local staff members are selected to attend professional development together. Carpooling to travel there increases the likelihood of networking and relationship building with someone you may not necessarily spend time with during your regular work day.

Have discussions with leaders in your school about how you can make the most of your Professional Practice days and how to ensure the targeted professional development meets your needs and those of your teaching team and the school's annual and long-term goals (AIP).

The education community

The Department promotes the importance of networks to improve curriculum provision. It brings together resources, support and the sharing of knowledge and best practice.

Bruce Armstrong in [Networks as communities of practice: Achieving excellence and equity](#) (Bastow) talks about this approach and how it requires a focussed effort to strengthen the transitions at each stage of the learning journey through early childhood, schools and post-school pathways, to create a cohesive system.

Whilst networking within our own professional domain is great, we can also network externally with community-based people to increase program partnerships between the school and external agencies. This not only benefits yourself as a teacher, it also continues to expand the relationships further and enhances your value as an educator in the school community.

Local network meetings allow teachers to engage with other schools in the area and work through initiatives or partnerships to be implemented in a community of practice. These network discussions allow contacts in our local area to share information regularly, working towards lifting the performance of achievement of all students and further building teacher capacity.

(The Department has a video on its website of the Top 10 Tips for graduate teachers from Canadian education consultant, Mary Jean Gallagher, which you may find to be helpful. Go to:

https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/classrooms/Pages/approachesmjggradtips.aspx)

How networking has built my professional practice

Collaboration and sharing of ideas has been invaluable for my learning. I have used the opportunities of school-wide meetings, observing other team members to identify best practice, and having colleagues observe my practice and provide constructive feedback ([Practice Principle 5 and 8](#)). These opportunities are sometimes mandated, but I have always found it helpful to use my own networks in the school for professional discussions around a specific area of need; another sounding board is always useful. Networking with parents and further strengthening relationships over time (strictly professional) has ensured that I can call on a steady flow of helpers at peak times – such as graduation, senior cooking and classroom literacy time – and they create new opportunities to strengthen my home-school networks.

I have had the opportunity to build teacher capacity in my school, specifically on the Workshop Model where I assisted teachers' understanding though team teaching and presenting to staff. During this time, I engaged in conversations with colleagues from other schools that I had previously met at Professional Developments, Network meetings and through a host of inter-school sessions. In talking about the resources used to garner best practice in school these conversations brought me directly to a specific professional development course on *Leading Literacy*, run through the [Bastow Institute](#). Having the opportunity to engage with other like-minded educators and to discuss the successes and challenges each of us encountered throughout the stages of implementation was beneficial. The support network and ability to reach out at any time was useful, whilst also building practice excellence within our own workplace. The effect was felt in schools across the state. This professional development course provided me with a launching pad to take the next step into leadership. It built my professional learning capacity and broadened my view of whole school impact.

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At a previous school, a colleague and I were quite fortunate to work directly with Dr Doug Fisher from San Diego, CA. Visiting his Health Sciences High and Middle School, as well as several other schools in the Chula Vista Elementary School District. After several months of communication, we witnessed the program running first hand, whilst engaging in state-wide professional development led by Doug. The resulting trip home ensured we would implement the program into our classrooms, levels and then within the school. Through the knowledge gained, we provided professional development sessions within the school, local cluster and regional areas. As a result, several former colleagues have since corresponded seeking articles or text books, online resources or materials that were developed over time.

Within my school, teachers engage in networking to share ideas and programs used in the school and to support them through challenging times. In a highly collaborative environment, we have many forums and avenues to engage in professional conversations formally and informally. Some staff use their networks for employment transition or for promotion – you may hear via word of mouth of an upcoming position.

As a newly appointed Assistant Principal, my networks are forever expanding and for this I am grateful. It can be quite daunting and overwhelming at times to engage as the 'new kid' but we all must start somewhere. In every job category or class, it is worthwhile when you have these experiences to put yourself out there. Some of my closest confidantes are those that I met through an educational setting. Fortunately, I get to work with some of them still and sometimes happily cross paths with those that I have worked with before.

Key takeaways for graduate teachers

As a teacher you are continually learning and thinking about how you can improve aspects of your teaching. It is important to ensure you utilise your networks. Speak with your mentor teacher in the school to discuss their personal journey, how they network both within the current educational setting and through external opportunities. Networking is a skill that can continually be developed and built upon over time.

There are so many different people you can learn from, so make the most of each opportunity to network and collaborate with others. Education is a journey, and networking is a critical component of that. Keep your opportunities open and check in occasionally, as you never know what is on the horizon.

References

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