Learning conversations with principals: leadership in full flow
Craig McDowell

Abstract
This paper outlines an ongoing case study that involves principals who meet as a Professional Learning Group (PLG) which operates within protocols that ensure the focus is on 'learning conversations'. It is a facilitated collaborative learning model which offers the opportunity to reflect on or improve practice with a group of fellow professionals. The focus is on principal's challenging and assisting their own and each other’s learning and development. Evidence reinforces the crucial link between a principal’s own development of critical thinking, their engagement with professional learning, and their ability to be an educational leader. The case study also links effective facilitation and the application of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The experience of flow occurs when people feel a deep, intense sense of fulfilment, often in a challenging environment when motivation to succeed is driven by completion of the task. Experiential and emotional learning processes that both facilitator and principals experience during a PLG, are shared in the paper.

Introduction
The primary purpose of this case study is to:

- identify factors that enable principals/participants (these terms will be used interchangeably throughout paper) to fully engage and participate in a facilitated collaborative professional learning model;
- explore and examine the effectiveness of this model and
- begin to develop a reflective framework for professional learning group facilitation - derived from participants’ perspective - with the aim of informing educational leadership practice.

This paper outlines messages from the literature that underpin the research, as well as my thinking, experiences and influences upon my practice within the context of some of the preliminary findings of the research. Some questions are posed to exemplify a conversational approach and the participatory nature of inquiry.

Themes that are explored in the paper include:

- Professional learning groups(PLG) and collaborative leadership learning
- Experiential and emotional learning processes
- Enhancing engagement - thriving and getting in the flow

The key research question that provided significant insight into principals’ reflective perspectives was:

What aspects of facilitation enable you to think about an in-depth question (or questions) that will effect a change in your leadership behaviour or in your professional practice? (McDowell, 2007)

Piggot-Irvine’s (2007) research which suggested that outcomes of effective facilitation, including participant demonstration of broadened reflection, changes in thinking and behaviour, and changed practice, influenced the shape of this study and key research question. Further, Piggot-Irvine (2007) posited that a facilitator should continually reflect upon and improve the programmes s/he facilitates, and seek evaluative feedback to aid reflection. Both short term and long term evaluation is required if robust evidence of participant’s attitudinal and practice changes is to be acquired and the impact of these on student achievement and school practices measured. This research then, provided an impetus for the present study.

Craig McDowell. ACEL & CCEAM Conference: Sydney, Australia 2010
craig.mcdowell@canterbury.ac.nz or c-r-mcdowell@xtra.co.nz
Page 1
Further influences on the research were provided by Hargreaves (2005) who suggested that the type of reflection that a participant experienced determined whether professional development was effective or ineffective. Hargreaves (2005) referred to Handy (1997) and Claxton (1997) to assist with the identification of two aspects of reflection that influence the degree of professional learning gained. They include:

- In what ways did it or did it not address the “lesser and greater hungers?”
- In what ways did it embody or obstruct elements of slow learning?

From a facilitation perspective, I consciously seek authentic contexts to satisfy "hungers" and to provide experiences and opportunities to ensure learning is sustainable. This approach aligns to that of Priest & Gass (1997) who identify the central purpose of facilitation is: to enhance the quality of the learning experience, to assist participants in finding directions and sources for functional change, and to create changes that are lasting and transferable. Priest & Gass (1997) also suggest that any review of facilitation methodology should be focused on continual improvement of facilitator performance.

The outcomes of learning conversations within PLGs should be focused on creating a learning environment that maximises facilitator performance and mentally and emotionally challenges participants, as it is upon testing their ability to develop and grow - to thrive and move into the flow channel as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). A measure of effective facilitation could for example, be a principal’s entry into an optimal flow zone, oblivious of the actual facilitator influence and performance.

Sugerman, Doherty, Garvey, & Gass (2000) also refer to aspects of effective facilitation. They suggest that embodied in achieving best practices in reflective learning there are two interrelated concepts:

- Appropriate focus or "depth" of the reflective experiences for clients
- Appropriate ethical decision making processes in reflective learning

This notion provides a facilitation challenge in terms of meeting the needs of participants. Facilitators need to be aware of the responsibilities and consequences of their work. Wolfe (2000) highlighted the ethical issues inherent in facilitator work, and the potential conflict that can arise in seeking to enable participants to move forward in their own growth and development on the one hand and the manipulation of those participants on the other hand.

Having explored some of the pertinent literature to this ongoing inquiry case study, the paper will next explicitly link the findings to this literature. It will contextualise the collaborative leadership learning opportunities and develop and apply a coherent reflective framework that captures the effective elements of facilitation.

**Methodology**

Qualitative research techniques were used in this study to provide insight into the richness, complexity and range of principal's attitudes towards learning, values, and leadership, and my own view of facilitation. A variety of fieldwork techniques including: a questionnaire/survey, overt observation, and unstructured interviews provided participants an opportunity to share both their experiences and their interpretation of them (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

The case study method was appropriate for this study because it allowed exploration and a description of the perspectives of principals and my facilitation experiences, when the context was important (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). This approach reflected the emergent research design principles of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).
The PLG that is the focus of this study was formed in 2008 and meet regularly (at least four times a year). The group is comprised of six principals with varying levels of experience and representative of secondary, primary, state, and private sector schools.

In meeting ethical guidelines, anonymity of participants and confidentiality of data was assured, principals voluntarily participated, signed consent, and were informed that they were able to withdraw from the project at any time.

A potential social risk inherent in the PLG process was identified by principals. This focused on the professional transparency required of leaders if the full benefits of the participation were to be realised. This risk was minimised however, because the group already had established relationships and knowledge of one another’s respective organisational environments. Further, my personal relationship with the principals, developed through working with a number of them on one to one basis in other contexts, minimised this risk.

**Professional learning groups and collaborative leadership learning**

The model of learning described as ‘Collaborative Leadership Learning’ in James, Mann, & Creasy (2006) and NC SL (2006) enables leaders to develop their own leadership capability in such a way that they feel enabled to work with others on their leadership development. In turn, one of the aims of a professional learning group is to develop a leader’s role in championing the learning of leadership in their school communities. Leaders’ ideas of their role in leading learning are then shaped by their own leadership development experiences.

Within the New Zealand school leadership environment, the leadership quality of ako (being a learner) as described in Ministry of Education (2008) is about building collaborative learning. Ako includes a reciprocal approach to leading learning and in this regard there is an expectation that principals act as important role models for their schools. A principal’s own development of critical thinking, their engagement in professional learning, and the ability to be an educational leader, are all linked (Ministry of Education, 2008). An effective principal needs to have their own professional learning programme designed to help inform their thinking and practice. Participation in a professional learning group is one mechanism for facilitating principal currency with issues and developments in the wider school sector.

Through participation in a professional learning group, principals learn to identify sound practice and processes through a collaborative approach to leadership, learning and professional development (Durrant, Bartholomew & Vincent, 2006). This builds a culture of increased participation, capacity for leadership and a higher level of dialogue, knowledge and understanding about learning. It is this ‘learning conversation’ that enables deep dialogue to take place (NC SL, 2006). Hargreaves (2005) supported the establishment of such a learning environment when describing the characteristics of a networked learning community: sharing and transferring knowledge, and stimulating professional fulfilment and motivation. The PLG meeting regularly enables this sharing, knowledge transfer, collective and creative problem-solving through learning together, and peer and professional support.

As in NC SL (2006), the dialogue is facilitated and follows certain agreed protocols to guarantee maximum learning for participants. It is a collaborative learning model which offers principals attempting to improve their practice, a co-operative group of fellow professionals with whom to engage in order to challenge and assist their own and each other’s learning and development (Cotton, 2005).

The facilitation is a planned conversation which allows principals to reflect on their practice in a structured way, and therefore enables them to experience the subsequent learning conversation as a problem-solving opportunity. NC SL (2006) describes this as a collaborative enquiry where participants commit themselves to finding a solution together – the essence of collaborative leadership learning. Cotton (2005) suggested that the facilitator needs to deliberately move the focus of the conversation into the areas of uncertainty, of choice and intuitive judgements, in order to identify the areas for new learning and action.

Craig McDowell. ACEL & CCEAM Conference: Sydney, Australia 2010
craig.mcdowell@canterbury.ac.nz or c-r-mcdowell@xtra.co.nz
Page 3
The emphasis on learning through experience and a collective approach, that can transfer into changes in school culture and attitudes that lead to organisational transformation (James, Mann, & Creasy, 2006). Hopkins et al (2001) in fact advocates that leadership should be developed through such experiential and innovative methodologies.

**Experiential and emotional learning processes.**

In considering responses to the key research question; what aspects of facilitation enable you to think about an in-depth question (or questions) that will affect a change in your leadership behaviour or in your professional practice, the link between experiential and emotional learning processes that both facilitator and principals experience provides a context for depth of thinking and feeling through dialogue. If being challenged to maximise learning and to stimulate fulfilment and motivation, emotions will be provoked. McArthur & Johns (1999) suggested that something activates our innermost values, our sense of purpose and impacts on our relationships with others in an intelligent way during experiences that involve our emotions.

To help frame the powerful influence of emotions, I have drawn on the work of Salovey & Mayer (1990). They first developed the notion that to promote and develop emotional intelligence, goals need to be established, including:

- identifying own feelings;
- managing own feelings;
- identifying emotions of others;
- understanding emotions in others and
- building positive relationships.

Beland (2007) suggested that integrating social and emotional learning processes may enable people to develop the skills to recognise and manage emotions, form positive relationships, solve problems, become motivated to accomplish a goal, make responsible decisions, and avoid risky behaviour. These skills also form the basis of the outcomes of this case study PLG. If the learning context is personal and therefore relevant and engaging, as is necessary for collaborative leadership learning (NCSL, 2006), the ability of a facilitator to interpret, or understand the emotional and social scenarios that are presented during the PLG, is imperative to developing and applying emotional intelligence.

Is a focus on integrating emotional and social competencies into facilitation programmes the basis for effective facilitation? By continually reflecting on and practicing the necessary competencies or abilities related to emotional intelligence, will a facilitator enable participants to also develop them? This process of continual reflection is captured within Mayer & Salovey’s (1997) definition of emotional intelligence:

> The ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth (1997, p. 5).

In this context, Mayer & Salovey (1997) posit that emotional intelligence consists of four separate components or branches. These components include:

- perceiving and identifying emotions – the ability to recognise how you and those around you feel;
- assimilating and using emotions – the ability to generate emotion, and then reason with this emotion;
- understanding emotions – the ability to understand complex emotions and emotional chains, how emotions transitions from one stage to another and;
- managing emotions – the ability which allows you to manage emotions in yourself and in others.

These components have been used during the facilitation of PLG’s as a discussion debriefing tool, prior to participants integrating emotions with their thinking about how to apply their new knowledge.
Sultanoff (2007) suggested that as with all skills acquisition, emotional intelligence can be developed through didactic instruction, role modelling, and direct experience. Experiential learning involves both repeated practice and direct experience. The following diagrams capture the comparison between experiential and emotional learning and incorporate Mayer & Salovey’s (1997) four components:


![Experiential Learning Process Diagram](image)


![Emotional Learning Process Diagram](image)

Enhancing engagement - thriving and getting in the flow

Having examined and developed their own emotional intelligence in the capacity of a facilitator, a subsequent question to ask when addressing the learning needs of participants is: How does a facilitator or participant in
the group, determine and address the level of engagement for any individual, in comparison to that individual’s skills and challenge level?

When an individual is emotionally engaged in a learning activity, there is increased evidence of attentiveness and a greater chance of remembering content (McArthur & Johns, 1999). Through the process of reflecting on what they have learned about themselves and their relationships to others, the development of their personal, social and emotional skills strikes a chord with individuals in terms of what they believe they need to thrive (Beland, 2007).

How are our thought processes linked to being emotionally engaged and subsequently getting into the flow and thriving? Zull (2002) defined the notion of ‘thriving’ as an experience that impacts on the pleasure centres of the brain. The brain is always alert, scoping for incoming stimuli, for danger or pleasure. Thriving is a state when an individual can develop critical thinking, self reflection and self esteem through engagement which in turns leads to a sense of wellness. There is neuroscientific evidence that in a collaborative learning environment, learning can be more engaging, memorable and equitable (Walser, 2010) than in solo learning context. Further, Walser (2010) argued that effective group learning facilitation can harness the natural propensity of humans to interact.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) first developed Flow Theory as a mechanism for understanding the potential of performance as a source of motivation. He suggested that any activity which induced flow had the capacity to push a person to higher levels of performance, enjoyment and consciousness, thus fostering a sense of wellness and, stimulating fulfilment and motivation. When at a peak, this state of consciousness where abilities are in balance with the demands of task has all the components of rational thinking, passion, and engagement. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argued that such an individual experience and performance can be transformed by concentrated attention on activities that provide variety, appropriate and flexible challenges, clear goals, and immediate feedback.

Flow is engagement in the present – complete and total engagement of mind and body (physical, emotional, mental). This is achieved when:

- there a purposeful relationship between self and the environment
- there is a focus on the present and the process
- an individual actually appears to lose consciousness of self

Csikszentmihalyi (1990)

People can though, grow to be disengaged. In response to this, Gustafson (2006) suggested that peer involvement can be viewed as empowering both to an individual and to other participants who might appear disengaged. Experiential activities may need to be altered to address the individual needs and goals through the redirection of an activity and involving of others in the group.

Gustafson (2006) defines two movements within the flow context; from boredom to flow, the other from anxiety to flow. When a person is provided the opportunity to move from boredom to flow, the personal challenge from a facilitator can be framed around personal growth and an invitation to show empathy for others in the group. When a person is emotionally engaged and appears anxious or stressed, and when facilitators strive to move participants to an expanded comfort zone, support and encouragement from others can expedite this expansion.

In a group environment, engagement can be increased through the assignation of individuals to appropriate developmental roles that promote their “expertise in something” thereby facilitating them to be challenged at a level appropriate to their understanding (Walser, 2010). Applying Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow Theory (1990) and incorporating the thinking of Nadler & Luckner (1992), Gustafson (2006) developed a diagrammatic model to position these movement zones as follows:
This model allows facilitators to measure where an individual is placed in terms of their engagement, based on perceptions of an individual’s verbal input, body language, energy level, and commitment to activity. With the goals and expectations of the individuals in mind, the facilitator may then select activities and/or structure a progression of activities, to allow individuals to interchange between the Grow-Flow-Edge zones (Gustafson, 2006).

Gustafson (2006) developed a more complex model of comparing the challenge level and ability of a participant through facilitation, to where and when optimal experiential learning would occur for them. The model incorporates effective coaching practices – a key element being relational trust, social and emotional competencies, and all the elements of engagement and thriving to enable the movement into flow.

This model has enabled me as a facilitator to continually reflect on the quality of the learning experiences for principals, and to assist them to in finding directions and sources for functional change, and to create changes that are lasting and transferable. It has also provided a facilitation process that has assisted with the development of a reflective framework around my performance as a facilitator as Priest & Gass (1997) suggested is necessary.

**Preliminary findings from evaluations**

Evidence was collected from written evaluative feedback based on Guskey’s (2002) five levels of professional development facilitation as well as personal conversations with participants. A sample of principal’s response to the questions is shared below.
What factors contribute to the PLG to be effective and successful for you?

The physical make up of the group was considered extremely important to its success and participants' levels of engagement. Specific factors included: extensive range of knowledge, skills and attributes, different personal styles of leadership and a variety of educational contexts. The relevance of the professional readings and activities that were facilitated were linked closely to best practice leadership and ultimately, the improvement of student outcomes, which was considered to be very important.

Reflecting Cotton's (2005) premise that the purpose of collaborative learning was to engage in order to challenge and assist their own and each other’s learning and development, one principal stated:

"Relational trust and openness among participants in a challenging but supportive environment contributed to my motivation to contribute, learn and enjoy shared learning"

What new knowledge or skills did you gain and what prompted these?

Through reflective practice on in-depth ideas, principals expressed a desire to determine what is going well at all levels of leadership and what the priorities might be for improvement. Responses included: establishing goals, strategic resourcing and teacher development. This paralleled elements of thriving that Zull (2002) defined, in that principal’s experiences created a positive attitude and a sense of confidence and well being through self reflection and creative thinking, in response to the continual challenges they face.

"I now appreciate the value of school culture development through reflection and the sharing of research: different leadership models, practiced ideas for management, and creative thinking. This has helped me to grow a positive disposition to the complexity and busyness of my role".

"I have different perspectives on leadership and cultural change through a variety of approaches to problem solving and responding to challenges. The group has provided support and confirmation that we all face similar challenges, even in different contexts".

Has your attitude or perception regarding your personal leadership changed?

Principals recognised that to focus on small and incremental steps to improvement with the big picture in mind, even when the details seem to be pressing was imperative to sustainability. Their discussion also reinforced the need to provide opportunities for other (future) leaders to discuss and debate leadership, so that there was shared or distributed leadership widely dispersed throughout the organisation. Their view on leadership has broadened and incorporated the notion of collective responsibility and accountability as described in Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd (2009). It has also provided some new solutions to challenges and dilemmas.

"Leadership is about change, within oneself and throughout the organisation. Through continually putting forward a vision of betterment, and challenging myself as an individual, I can be inspirational and able to galvanise change".

"Has confirmed and deepened my understanding of and belief in the importance in a relational and collaborative approach to leadership".

"I now factor in more deliberate growth and understanding of leadership within whole school improvement".

What actual changes will you make or have you made as a result of this new learning? How will you/have you applied your new knowledge?

Principals indicated that they are now more directly involved in the review of teaching and learning through informed practice in classrooms. This reflects aspects of pedagogical leadership in Ministry of Education (2008)
including; participating in professional learning and being recognised as leading learners, and having direct, hands-on involvement with curriculum design and implementation.

They also indicated they would take a more deliberate and strategic approach to leadership development of in particular senior leaders and heads of faculties. This they said reflects a 21st century perspective of leadership in that the future is unknown. This forward thinking focus is on the necessary processes to change school culture and develop a school’s vision. There was recognition that this change is about continual improvement, solving problems and challenging issues, articulating ideas to these senior leaders, and developing an ongoing vision of collaborative and participative leadership. Principals in some cases have initiated and led PLGs for staff as part of their strategic plan for professional learning and development. This involves sharing research, articles and visiting each others’ classrooms with reflective feedback in groups.

Of particular interest though, was the alignment with McArthur & Johns (1999) when principals shared the changes they would personally make when enacting their sense of purpose and relationships with others.

"I am more reflective around dealing with and coping with emotional challenges – now trying to help other staff develop emotional resiliency".

"Being in this group has helped emphasise the need to be resilient, having a positive disposition, and improved my self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses".

Some principals were facilitating and leading sessions on emotional intelligence with different groups including student leadership groups. They are initiating discussions around self awareness through self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. The emphasis has been on empathy and linking this to good teacher practice.

What difference will it make for students and their achievement (how)?

Principals referred to building an organisation that is visionary and focuses on teacher effectiveness, and attending to their own leadership actions as being vital. There was reference to leadership through teachers being empowered to help create the platform for improved student achievement. They acknowledged that their leadership role reflects being people orientated and ultimately create educationally powerful connections for all students, linked to student achievement. This strength in leadership was regarding as a strategy to strengthen staff and community relationships, which in turn can contribute enormously to a positive environment for all.

"Students sense this and it provides motivation to achieve, with pride in themselves and their school being fostered. A common sense of purpose, trust in leadership and staff, strengthens student achievement".

"With a greater understanding of my leadership role in empowering or enabling teachers to lead learning, a culture of achievement, inclusiveness and responsiveness for both students and parents – especially those from minority cultures, will be facilitated".

Has the PLG today (or at another time) prompted you to think about an in-depth question (or questions) that will affect a change in you personally or in your professional practice?

- Have I been effective in transforming culture through shaping the actions, and impacting on teaching and learning practices?
- What needs to happen on a continual basis that affects school culture?
- What opportunities can I find to develop the understanding of emotional intelligence in students and staff in order to demonstrate a commitment to learning?
- How do I sustain my own development in order to meet the needs of others and lead and adapt to regular changes and challenges which keep me passionate?
• How do I develop skills to increase my own self-awareness and effectively use these insights to work with staff and students?

Closing comments: Learning conversations with principals: leadership in full flow

As a facilitator, I now continually challenge myself and endeavour to self reflect around a reflective framework based on a key question posed by Hargreaves (2005): It what ways does the facilitated experience demonstrate and challenge my facilitation of, for and as learning to enable the demonstration of:

• my personal conviction to make direct or indirect impacts on performance on others
• role modelling of reflective practices to enhance or foster a culture of enquiry
• anticipating and planning for change and decision making processes?

My facilitation guiding principles include:
• continually connecting with group and maintaining engaging relationships
• an unrelenting focus on learning – both with the purpose of the PLG and the learning processes facilitated

My aim when facilitating groups is now targeted to address certain objectives in order to evoke powerful associations, with the intended result being more sustained functional growth of participants. This approach aligns to that suggested by Sugerman, Doherty, Garvey, & Gass, (2000).

Specific strategies that I use include:
• consciously moving into and creating flow conditions
• catering to the needs of individuals and the group
• balancing challenge and support through the implementation of change (often of beliefs and attitudes)
• integrating experiential and emotional learning
• contextualising the reflective framework
• creating conditions to achieve a sense of well being

This purposeful facilitation is a key part of Priest & Gass’ (1997) isomorphic framing method, where the experience is introduced through framing that is in the context and culture of the participant. In this way a deliberate and purposeful metaphoric experience is facilitated. By improving my own emotional intelligence and challenging myself as facilitator to move into the flow regularly, I am better able to help others to achieve more.

Through their participation in the PLG, principals in this study demonstrated emotional engagement, and responded to the collaborative environment with enthusiasm, professionalism and commitment. They were focused and motivated to improve their personal leadership as well as the leadership of others in the PLG. Principals increasingly broadened their reflections of the relevance of tasks to their leadership and school context, and to changing their thinking around leadership. The principals’ were open in sharing their increased knowledge, awareness of values and understanding about learning that was authentic to their own context, , Principal’s increased awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence was a contributing factor to their self awareness and ability to process their emotions.

Principals indicated that there was a purposeful relationship between themselves and other members of the group – their learning network expanded. They were able to forget about the busyness of the day and focus on the PLG tasks and conversations. They enjoyed the balance between the challenge of the task and challenge to their leadership capacity and capability.
The developing reflective framework was derived from participants' perspective. Through deliberate acts of facilitation, these perspectives reflected principals’ motivation and commitment to improve their leadership practices and ultimately student achievement.
Acknowledgement


References


Craig McDowell. ACEL & CCEAM Conference: Sydney, Australia 2010
craig.mcdowell@canterbury.ac.nz or c-r-mcdowell@xtra.co.nz


