Leading a networked state primary school: Broulee Public School

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Introduction

Broulee Public School (BPS) provides an invaluable insight internationally for all primary school Principals looking to lead a networked school community. It is an ‘everyday’ state primary school, located within regional NSW, which with no special funding has evolved to the stage where it sits on par with the pathfinding schools globally working within the networked mode.

It not only has a level of digital technology that would rival the leading primary schools internationally (PBS, 2011) but most importantly is taking full advantage of that facility in its everyday teaching and administration to provide its children a quality 24/7/365 holistic education for the 21st century.

Significantly it is using the technology and the educational acumen of its staff to work collaboratively with its parents and community in providing a 0-12 ‘schooling’ in a manner that transforms a normal ‘resource strapped’ primary school into a ‘resource rich’ networked school community.

How that is possible makes for an interesting study.

Not surprisingly much of the answer lies in the quality of the leadership, and while the Principal Sue Lowe has been and is, central to the on-going evolution of the school, so too has been its embrace of the multi-level concept of leadership Lipnack and Stamps (1994) view as fundamental to the success of a networked organisation. Broulee PS has fostered the development of ‘school leaders’ at all levels in and out of the professional educator ranks.

It is very easy, particularly for secondary educators, to forget how few staff there are, within every medium sized primary school, and how little release time there is for the teachers. Primary schools have to be that much more efficient and tightly integrated than their secondary counterparts. They have to use every one of the professional teaching and support staff plus more. That need is markedly amplified once primary schools move to the networked mode, take their teaching outside the classroom walls and seek, like Broulee PS, to work with its homes and community in ‘teaching’ 24/7/365, 0-12.

Smart, highly efficient, integrated and normalised everyday use of the school, home and community digital technology is imperative. As is having a leadership team, teaching and support staff, children, parents and community, ready and competent to make astute use of that technology in all the school’s operations.

Broulee’s normalisation of the digital in its everyday teaching and its move to the networked mode (Lee & Finger, 2010) came from over a decade of concerted homework that built upon the vision of the founding Principal; and while being recognised in the Director–General’s awards on several occasions as one of NSW DET’s leading users of technology, it has only been in the last twelve months that effort begun to yield the hoped for educational dividends.

One of the vital lessons that emerge from Broulee’s movement to the networked mode is the necessity of putting in the hard yards required to achieve ‘digital takeoff’ (Lee, 2007; Lee & Gaffney, 2008) and to ready all staff – and not just a few early adopters - to operate successfully as a networked school community.

Even small primary schools are highly complex human organisations. Once they go networked that complexity and the speed of constant change grows exponentially.

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It is therefore essential that they successfully address all the human and technological variables (Lee & Winzenried, 2008) needed to achieve the normalised whole school use of the digital before seeking to move to the networked mode.

**Context**

Just briefly, Broulee PS is a village school of 320 students, in a delightful coastal and bush setting (http://www.broulee-p.schools.nsw.edu.au/Home.html). The socio-economic profile of the school places it pretty well on the Australian norm, and importantly as such in the NSW DEC context it receives no supplementary funding other than that acquired through special awards like that from the region’s learning team. It is obliged to work with the staffing and resources allocated under formula.

The school does however service an educationally rich community with two other schools and many of its elders having occupied senior educational and administrative positions in Canberra.

**The Groundwork**

Broulee PS’s quest to make the astute use of the digital began over a decade ago with the decision by the school to provide all staff a laptop.

Over the years, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the A/P ICT David Hounsell and the now iCentre coordinator, Isabelle Cameron and the school’s long term adoption of an Apple base, the school has gradually been able to ensure all teachers have the capability and the tools in their room to make best use of the networked world. Every classroom has an IWB, pods of iMacs and access to a suite of Mac laptops, iPads, relatively high speed Internet and two rooms with full video-conferencing facilities. The iCentre has two IWBs, two large LCD screens, approximately thirty iMacs and its own wikiserver.

Significantly it was the installation of the IWBs, and the ‘just in time’ staff training that accompanied their introduction, that moved the school to the digital phase of its evolution. However it was a new school leadership and a desire to make far greater and smarter use of the school and burgeoning home digital technology, in lifting the attainments of all children in the NAPLAN test, which moved the school to the networked phase.

**Collaborative Schooling**

In September 2010 the school leadership adopted a new educational vision for the school that took advantage of the power of the technology to underpin a new collaborative model of schooling.

It sought to use its new found capability to network with its homes and community and collaborate with them in providing its current and prospective children a 24/7/365 holistic education from birth onwards that would better prepare all to succeed at school. The desire was to more astutely use the very considerable and largely untapped digital and ‘teaching’ resources in its homes and community – that which Lee and Finger had identified (Lee & Finger, 2010) - to collaboratively ‘teach’ all children while they were awake.

The school was particularly keen to work with its homes in markedly improving the development of the key building blocks in the pre-primary years and was very conscious while children in the digital world learn every moment they are awake, that the current model of schooling engages and seeks to shape them less than 20 per cent of that time each year. In a networked world, that was considered grossly inadequate. The school opted to term its new approach Collaborative Schooling (http://www.broulee-p.schools.nsw.edu.au/Collaborative_Schooling.html).

The challenge was then to adopt a mode of delivery appropriate for its context, that was highly effective and efficient, that promoted authentic collaboration among all including the staff, the students, the parents, grandparents, caregivers and community, and which was sustainable with the resources available. The tight integration of all those elements became apparent at the school’s launch of its Collaborative Schooling initiative in March 2011.

Using the metaphor of the jigsaw, the aforementioned Collaborative Schooling site provides an idea of the comprehensive suite of tightly interrelated activities this relatively small primary school is offering, the technology being employed to support those offerings, the range of people involved, and the multi-level leadership required to mount and sustain the approach.

However that jigsaw doesn’t capture the key role the children of the school are increasingly playing. It is not simply in the creation and publishing of class blogs and Wikis, their ‘teaching’ of casual staff how to use IWBs, their ever rising expectations of what the teachers will do with
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the technology, their active encouragement of their parents and grandparents to be involved, but also, it is their deep understanding of the technology they have brought to the discussions on the use of the iPads and how they can use their mobile technology in class.

That student involvement, like that of the total staff, parents, grandparents, the community elders and the likes of the local shire and land council, the pre-primary providers, the University of Wollongong, the Australian College of Educators, the NSW DEC Illawarra South East Region Connected Learning Team and Promethean, hasn’t happened by chance but rather by having a digitally aware school leadership operating within a networked paradigm being prepared to lead, to answer the critics and to devote the time required to create a collaborative school community.

LESSONS LEARNED

While at the time of writing these are still very early days and there are already a plethora of lessons all primary schools moving to the digital and in turn networked phase of their evolution, can learn from the Broulee experience.

Some of those implications, particularly as pertains to the school’s creation of its iCentre and the lead role Teacher Librarians need to play within a networked school community, are fleshed out in two recent articles, the first by Lee and Hay in Connections (2011) and the second by Lee in SCAN (2011).

Others, particularly to do with the leadership and management are amplified in the soon to be released work by Lee and Finger, Leading a Networked School Community (in press).

Broulee PS is very happy to be contacted (broulee-p.school@det.nsw.edu.au) and to network with like-minded schools such as those in the UK with which it is currently partnering.

While space prevents us going into greater detail, addressing each of the following lessons learned by Broulee PS bears noting and careful consideration in your planning.

• **Total Staff Readiness.** All staff, teaching and support in a primary school have to be ready attitudinally and competence wise before the school can begin, like Broulee, working successfully within the networked mode. All teachers need to have normalised the everyday use of the digital in their teaching and all the support readied to play their part.

• **Shaping Vision.** The imperative of shaping an educational vision all within the school community, educated and poorly educated can understand, becomes that much greater with the move to the networked mode. Allied is the necessity of clearly delineating and reporting upon the attainment of the desired learning outcomes.

• **Promote Multi-Level Leadership.** While it is essential the Principal, and the School Executive lead, it is also vital the school supports the development of leaders at all levels in and outside the school, where the leader/s can take operational responsibility for their patch. In the Broulee situation for example, community elders run the choir, the iCentre coordinator runs the integrated library/ICT operations, a student manages the foyer fish tank, and a parent/community team member organises the preparation and distribution of the weekly Successful Schooling Today series.

• **Think Networked.** One has to work within a networked paradigm, constantly seeking out solutions that take astute advantage of the networked world.

• **Integrate, Like Never Before.** With ever-greater digital convergence, the necessity of working highly efficiently and using many operations for multiple purposes, it is very important that all operations are tightly integrated. In the Broulee situation the class blogs are for example simultaneously:
  * a vital teaching tool within the classroom;
  * a window for parents and grandparents into their child’s learning;
  * an open classroom door through which the leadership can monitor teaching;
  * an expression of authentic collaboration;
  * a homework and lesson guide;
  * a school marketing facility;
  * an instant school/teacher evaluation tool.

• **Close Your Library and Open an iCentre.** By integrating the operations of the old library and school ICT unit into the one iCentre and having it take responsibility for all the school’s digital information services and channels - the school’s technology, the ongoing support and development of the total school teaching and support staff - you’ll
be creating and empowering the on-going development of the heart of the networked school community.

- **Understand authentic and disciplined collaboration.** While all support the concept of collaboration, few in schools ever collaborate, particularly with their wider community; know what is entailed in disciplined collaboration; know when and where not to collaborate or have developed the kind of skills Hansen (2010) has identified as being crucial to the on-going development of a networked organisation. One of the challenges Broulee has had to address is to convince all members of its community, including the teachers, that it does want to collaborate.

- **Use the appropriate technology.** A key lesson the Broulee PS leadership has grasped is to opt for technology solutions, hardware and software apposite to your situation as a primary school, which will assist to achieve your goals in a manner you can afford to sustain. Importantly Broulee opted for an integrated Apple solution, IWBs able to use the best Apple based IWB teaching application at no extra cost, opted for its own blog and wikiserver, avoided any kind of learning platform and a model that would in time both let the children use their own mobile technology and reduce the financial burden on the school.

- **Rapid on-going change and evolution.** The challenge for the leadership in the networked mode is not to stimulate but rather to monitor and control as much as is feasible the rapid pace of change. One needs to know when to apply the brakes.

- **Find time.** With the pace of change, the need for tight integration, efficiencies and on-going enhancement of staff readiness, primary schools have to find the release time that will give the professionals time to reflect and develop.

- **Integrate early childhood education and care (ECEC).** One can, as Mal Lee and others have done in aforementioned new publications, write a whole chapter on this topic but if you want all your children to enter school far better than now, you'll need to involve your school, like Broulee PS, in the pre-primary 'teaching' of the 0-5.

- **Curriculum dissonance.** While yet early days there are strong indicators that the further schools move into the networked mode and seek to work with their homes in the provision of a 24/7/365 holistic education for the 21st century, the school and parents will increasingly find key areas of learning and development, not addressed in the still strongly academically skewed curriculum. Broulee for example is already finding that while promoting the importance of collaboration, networking and teamwork, none of those attributes are addressed or assessed in the current primary curriculum. They will also begin to ask the seemingly alarming question – could certain areas of learning be better taught outside the school?

- **Sustainable resourcing.** While the movement to the networked mode can rapidly make the school ‘resource rich’ careful thought needs to be given to how the school can better deploy its recurrent funding.

**Conclusion**

The Broulee PS experience is an important one for all school leaders but in particular those in primary schools, in that it provides an insight into the networked operational paradigm: an operational paradigm that in time all schools will work within.

It gives an indicator into what is possible, an appreciation of its fundamentally different nature and the skills required of a school leader in that setting, and a glimpse of the kind of issues school leaders and the particular school community will need to address.

**References**


**Acknowledgement**

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