Digital Normalisation

Key Variables Evidenced in Pathfinders

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Conscious of the dearth of writing on this topic I interviewed some 70 odd leaders in the UK, US, NZ and Australia who were leading a school that had normalised or near normalised the whole school use of the digital or who had closely observed the uptake of digital technology in schools, from within tertiary education or in a consultancy role.

I very deliberately chose to analyse only the work of the pathfinders across the developed world that had normalised the use of the digital, opting to ascertain if there were many common attributes evident in that grouping.

The challenge in 2013 was to search out those schools

Ultimately I was fortunate to analyse the workings of an extensive cross section of schools– primary and secondary – government, catholic and independent – urban and regional – small and large - above and below SES norm – in four quite different developed nations

What surprised was the remarkable commonality of the experiences – the developments – the trends – the issues – emerging from this set of schools – with schools at the normalisation evolution stage wherever they be in the world often having far more in common than schools down the road in the same education authority

What also hit home was the years it had taken highly proactive schools to reach their current position, with most taking 15-20 years between the initial envisioning and today, and that in that time there had invariably been changes in the principal, on-going staff turnover and highs and lows in the schools' journeys.

Vitally it was also apparent that all had moved – largely unwittingly - thru common key stages and had had to experience that stage and develop their thinking and operations accordingly before being able to move to the next stage.

This is a concept very new to schooling that has major implications for later adopters.

Towards the final interviews – even when interviewing leadership teams in seemingly unique setting – the same points kept emerging

Some of the attributes are well documented over the decades in the organisational change literature

Many have already been identified and examined in *The Use of Instructional Technology in Schools* (Lee and Winzenried, 2009), *Developing a Networked School Community* (Lee and Finger, 2010), *Bring Your Own Technology* (Lee and

Levins, 2012), *Collaboration in learning* (Lee and Ward, 2013) and *Realising Educational Benefits* (Ward and Lee, in press).

Others – particularly those pertaining to the movement into the digital normalisation phase have emerged in the recent round of interviews.

All ultimately will be analysed in depth in the forthcoming publication on *Digital Normalisation and School Transformation.*

It is important to appreciate that

a. while I have listed each of the attributes singly all are tightly interrelated and all need be borne in mind in shaping and constantly evolving the individual school's particular ecology. Inability at this point in time to say which or which combinations are the most important. Very real likelihood all are and if even one is not addressed successfully the overall success could be diminished

b. while many of variables have been important throughout the school's 15/20 years evolution/journey others only become important/impactful when a key developmental stage was reached and the school was ready to make the next stage. While for example the shaping vision and the leadership of the principal will always be important the willingness of the staff to genuinely collaborate with the children's homes or the preparedness of the school to encourage the children to choose which of their own technology they take to class will only be able to come into play when the school is ready to make that move.

c. while most of the schools have reached the stage they are at today without any or limited support from – or indeed in spite of the opposition from – their local education authority all recognised the ever greater importance of interdependence and the local authority doing as the good proactive ones do facilitating and supporting the individual school efforts. What was disappointing was the number that had become disenchanted with the datedness of the advice given from the centre or who had had good local support disbanded.

d. the early adopters in their journey into unchartered territory have had numerous formal and informal discussions re the way forward - have made mistakes – taken the wrong path – but in those discussions and reflection on the mistakes will have undertaken– usually unwittingly – a highly authentic staff development program, probably far more significant and valuable than any theoretical post graduate course.

That understanding is vital for the later adopters.

What is also now becoming increasingly apparent is that the path to be followed by later adopters has some significant pitfalls not faced by the early adopters – but the experience of the pathfinders does provide the opportunity for the later adopters to avoid them and to make up lost ground.

Shaping organisational change

All the pathfinders interviewed commented upon the importance of following variables throughout their journey – all of which have been to the fore in the organisational change literature for decades; namely

- Strong shaping vision
- Developing and maintaining a strong culture of change within the organisation, where calculated risk taking was promoted. In most situations that culture was facilitated by the school leadership but in some was also assisted by the local education authority
- Strong leadership. The vital role of principals able to shape the desired ever-evolving school. Principal as CEO – as instructional leader
- Leadership's high expectations
- Significant school decision-making. Virtually all of the schools studied had very considerable control over their own operations with invariably a single line budget enabling them to use the monies allocated as desired. There were some however which have 'managed' to be largely semi-autonomous even though in theory they and their budget was centrally controlled.
- Teachers quest to constantly enhance the quality, appropriateness and effectiveness of their teaching
- Political acumen of the leadership – well versed in the art of keeping key stakeholders on-side while protecting own backside even when making major changes that run counter to prevailing approach.

'Take Off Phase

These are variables all the schools have addressed in getting all teachers to a predominantly digital teaching base, the school to become digital and in turn networked and for the total school community - its students, teachers and parents – to normalise the use of the digital in their everyday workings.

Many of the latter mentioned variables only come into the play when the school is ready.

- School specific solution. Recognition of the imperative of developing a solution apposite for the particular school in its context at this point in time.
- All pervasive educational focus – ensuring the digital is deployed as best as possible to assist achieve school's shaping educational vision.
- Recognition of the home/out of school 24/7/365 use of the digital and the desirability of building upon that capability/resources in C21 schooling
- Big picture strategic plan – that provides focus but also the flexibility to vary the plan as the need arises. Refer to comments in *Collaboration in learning* (2013). Mention all schools openly acknowledged mistakes made in their evolution, some major and expensive.
- On-going change and evolution perceived as the norm
- Riding the megatrends. Capability of the leadership to read, and ride the megatrends and when apt to move off and to the next wave.

- Development of a tightly integrated, ever evolving whole school ecology that consistently fosters the desired teaching and learning.
- Tight nexus between desired educational benefits and use of the digital, with the educational benefits always being the key focus
- Appropriate digital technology in every teaching room that assists all teachers shift from a paper to predominantly digital teaching base. NB all but one of the schools used IWBs to achieve that shift.
- Appropriate whole campus/classroom access to the requisite network infrastructure
- 'Personal' digital kit in hands of all within the school's community – the staff, the students and the homes – at least from around age 10 upwards.
- Equity – ensuring no student was left without his/her own technology, to use 24/7. All schools addressed the relatively small percentage in need of kit 'in house'.
- Whole staff digital normalisation in its teaching
- Digital technology and 'Net core to all school operations, teaching and administrative
- Distributed control and responsibility – with the educators ceding their unilateral control.
- Empowerment of all 'teachers' of the young - the children themselves, the parents, grandparents, teachers and the wider school community. Entails all being respected, given a voice and having their 'teaching' contribution systematically enhanced.
- Protecting the teachers – from overload – coming from individual enthusiasm - and from external sources – prioritising what the school will actually address
- Pronounced shift to in school, tailored whole staff development. Finding the time.
- Trust. Moving from the traditional default position of distrust in all except those in school's leadership group – to trust in all. Key facet of the empowerment. Fundamental to total school digital normalisation.
- Recognition children in normalising the use of their own suite of digital and network technology become free agents able to take their clientele anyway in the networked world.
- Authentic Home – school collaboration. Pooling of home educational expertise and digital capability with that of the school. Respect for the home and the contribution it needs made fundamental to successful digital normalisation and collaborative teaching.
- Collaboration in learning – trend pointing to ever greater collaboration between all the 'teachers' of the young in the 24/7/365 teaching
- Preparedness to question and vary traditional approaches to schooling
- Networked mindset. Strikingly apparent in all schools which had normalised. Commentator's observation re it missing in those who had yet to normalise – even when having sizeable proportion of staff using digital well. They still insular in their thinking.
- Networked resourcing. Extension of home – school pooling. Refer to Collaboration in learning coverage.

- Natural growth and evolution flowing from adoption of digital operational base
- Time – needed to grow and develop.
- Organisational integration – driven often unwittingly by ever- greater digital convergence
- Readiness to evolve/transform/change the organisational form of the school. Amplify examples
- Focus on using digital to enhance organisational efficiency, effectiveness, synergy and productivity
- Providing all with in the school's community – including the children the right and responsibility of choosing their own suite of digital technology they use at school
- BYOT – underscoring BYOT and not simply BYOD.

Digital Normalisation Phase

Stress still very early days with as yet few schools to learn from. The below however already apparent

- 100% normalisation of BYOT – of everyone within the school's community having their personal suite of digital technology they can use 24/7/365.
- Provision of apposite holistic and networked 24/7/365 21st century schooling. NB every school interviewed they were providing a 21st century regardless of national curriculum or testing regime.
- On-going evolution of the school's organisational form, attuning to meet ever- changing context
- Increased focus on desired 21st century educational benefits and their realisation – both in and outside school
- Normalised whole school community acceptance of of-going evolution and change
- School's recognition of young's digital understanding of the workings of their own kit
- Teachers focus on application of the student's technical capability in higher order teaching, for the first time in history not teaching the mechanics of how to use the instructional technology
- Marked shift to more personalised, collaborative mode of learning and teaching – in and outside school walls
- Students accorded greater responsibility for shaping own learning and teaching in and out of school
- Accentuated networked resourcing of school communities

Reinforce – as indicated talking at least 49 key closely interrelated variables – where the number and hence the complexity and challenge of addressing will continue to grow.

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