School Websites as Indicators

of School's Evolutionary Position

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Every school's website provides a telling insight into where it sits on the international school evolutionary continuum.

Within minutes those conversant with the school evolutionary stage indicators – as discussed in the last edition – can obtain an insight into the school's current position.

Possibly unwittingly your website invariably provides all interested a window to the school's workings, that is in many respects greater than that provided by the Australian Government's My School site.

Vitally it also provides an excellent insight into the school's leadership's thinking.

Have you looked lately at the message – intended and unintended – your school website communicates?

In researching the evolution of schooling in the UK, US, NZ and Australia over the last 5-6 years, in exploring the impact of digital normalisation on school transformation I've had occasion to examine many, many school websites.

It has become increasingly apparent, particularly now the first schools are moving into the Digital Normalisation stage that astute educators and parents globally – current and prospective - can and do increasingly use the school website as a quick and valid indicator of the evolutionary stage the school is at and if it is a school where one wants to send the children.

Governments and education authorities like to perpetuate the perception that all of their schools are the same. Most moreover seek to reinforce that myth by trying to have all 'their' schools use a standard website.

The reality, as explained in the last edition, is that schools are by no means the same. There is now immense and growing variability. All sit at different points along an ever-evolving, ever lengthening continuum, where the difference between the schooling provided at each end of the continuum is already dramatic and growing daily.

Variability is the new norm, fostered by the moves nationally and internationally to devolve greater autonomy to each school.

That variability is readily evidenced in the school website.

In its starkest form at the one end of the continuum one has the websites of school operating within a paper based paradigm which accord the website little priority, that are ill constructed, badly dated, with strong cyber barriers to the school's workings that reveal a school still operating in the traditional,

insular paradigm, making scant use of the digital with no great desire to reveal its work to the wider world.

At the other end of the continuum there are dynamic websites which are a key and integral part of the school's everyday operations, including its 24/7/365 teaching that are open to all users and observers to scrutinise, and are the medium through which the school conducts the operations involving all within the school's community. The websites are central to the school's workings. These are the schools that have normalised or near normalised the whole school use of the digital and which are seeking to take advantage of the educational opportunities being opened daily within the networked world.

In essence these schools in addition to revealing their everyday workings are providing all interested a tour of the school, able to taken anytime, from anywhere.

While for numerous reasons I'll not single out any particular sites for attention have a look at your school's website and a cross section of those in your region, schools that you know about and consider how well they reveal the stage the school is at on the evolutionary continuum and exemplify the school leadership's thinking.

In mooting the notion that school websites are – whether by design or not – a significant indicator of the evolutionary position of the school I'm not for a moment suggesting they are the only indicator. A quick check of the evolutionary stages at http//www.schoolevolutionarystages.net will reveal the many other related indicators one should consider. I'm also conscious that occasionally there will more happening within the school than is revealed in the website.

That said as ever more schools nationally and internationally open their doors - via their website – to their everyday workings so there will a growing expectation all other schools will follow suit.

What is already apparent from the research with the pathfinders globally is that there are evermore parents – parents who have normalised the use of the digital – who as a first step go to the school website for the insight into the school's workings, its position on the evolutionary scale and to adjudge the school's suitability for their children.

As quick indicators go the school website is an appreciably better guide than those used traditionally like the school homework policy or school uniform.

The Continuum

It is important to view the array of websites, the indicators, and the insights they provide in conjunction with the school evolutionary stages continuum.

Where only a decade ago virtually all schools operated within a paper based paradigm (Lee and Gaffney, 2008) ten years on the variability between schools, even in the same locale is now immense.

Space precludes an in-depth analysis of the key features of the websites at all points along the continuum but it is hoped the following few descriptors will serve to illustrate the kind of variability one can expect to see.

- **The Paper Based stage**

Mention has already been made of the paper based schools where the school leadership is communicating its belief – again unwittingly – through its website that the school attaches little importance to using the digital in its teaching, prefers to work in isolation behind its walls where it can maintain its unilateral control and has little desire to communicate or collaborate digitally with its wider community.

Those sentiments are expressed in websites that are simple, built for constancy and are static in nature, invariably dated, where access is severely constrained by password entry and where few would bother going to secure information on today's events or an insight into the teaching and learning of the school.

Further along the continuum – for the leadership is beginning to recognise the value of the digital but still within the insular paper based mode of schooling - one will see the more polished, and up to date school websites that are in reality little more than online school brochures, that provide a 'sanitised', often carefully spun view of the school's operations and information on coming events. Significantly a sizeable proportion of these sites use a template that favours constancy and continuity that is unable to accommodate rapid change.

One often gains the impression the school leadership has spent considerable monies getting the 'right' look and ensuring the site fulfils the web designer's perception of a 'good' school site, but the website is peripheral to the school's teaching.

- **Early Digital Stage**

Still further along the continuum are those websites communicating the school is moving at pace to use the digital more fully in its operations and which have begun to use the site as a part of the school's teaching and learning.

While most of these sites still have a significant 'online brochure' component one will find sections where the school is beginning to transition to a more extensive use of the digital, both in its communication and in the teaching and learning.

However access to the 'inner workings' of the school is tightly controlled, as well may be the student's use of the digital within the school. The 'ICT experts' are very much in control.

Significantly the school leadership is communicating – via the password only entry - its desire to corral if not indeed control the teaching and learning within the 'school walls' and is guarded in reaching out beyond the school walls and genuinely collaborating with the student's homes.

In brief the schools are still operating as insular, 'stand alone' organisations where the leadership is not yet willing to trust the students or many of the teachers in the more open use of the digital but are on the cusp of potentially major change.

- **Networked Stage**

The websites of schools operating in the networked stage are open to near full public scrutiny and have largely removed the use of passwords.

They have begun – again often unwittingly – dismantling the internal and external school walls and started working in the networked mode, drawing upon and enhancing the resources in and outside the school walls, tightly integrating increasingly complex operations and employing websites that facilitate these developments.

These schools who have a principal ready to lead the school's on-going evolution, a total teaching staff that has normalised the use of the digital and which are of a mind to genuinely collaborate with all the 'teachers' of the children in and outside the school walls.

What is becomingly increasingly apparent is that in removing the password protected cyber walls the principal is showing a game changing trust in the student's, teacher's and parents and their ability to use the digital astutely. For near on a 100 years school principals have worked from a position of distrust in the use of instructional technology (Lee and Winzenried, 2009); distrust most assuredly of the students, the parents and indeed most teachers.

The removal of the password barrier is communicating a trust of and a belief in all the members of the school community in their ability to contribute. When schools opt to have every class blog open for all to peruse and to invite the viewers to provide immediate feedback on the teaching being done that day they reveal their trust and respect for their community.

The websites of these schools are characterised by their openness, their dynamic nature and the facility for all interested to view the teaching free of constraints.

These websites are the synthesising component of a multi-faceted, multi-way digital communications suite that uses an ever-evolving array of web-based facilities to communicate and collaborate closely with the homes and the school's community in the 24/7/365 teaching and learning. Extensive use is invariably made of blogs and wikis, social networking facilities, online forum and surveys and the facility to communicate personally with all the school's community be it by email, SMS, Facebook and/or Twitter.

Importantly these are sites designed for all to users to readily contribute and to accommodate rapid on-going evolution.

Significantly while professional in appearance these are working websites used by all manner of staff, students and parents where the prime concern is the everyday operability and the facility for enhancing the work of the school community, where often at the end of each day there might be some mess still to be tidied.

While not the 'online brochure' these sites provide parents – and indeed grandparents, carers, education administrators anywhere in the world - a comprehensive insight into the everyday, unique workings of the school and its evolution, an account of the education it is actually providing and in so

doing are simultaneously providing public accountability and naturally, without any extra effort a vita school promotional facility.

These websites communicate a very different picture to that conveyed by the school websites at the other end of the continuum but do it in a way only possible when the school has reached this phase of its on-going evolution and development.

Conclusion

The value of websites as an indicator of the school's position on the evolutionary continuum lies not only the ease of use but also the deep-seated nature of the practice they communicate, where there is little facility for cosmetics and PR spin to disguise the reality and the underlying thinking of the school's leadership. When viewers can openly scrutinise the daily operations of the school the only way for other schools to replicate that performance is to make the concomitant evolutionary, cultural and structural changes.

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Bibliography

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