

Inspire

Revisiting the Ten Conditions for Learning



By Beate Planche

Capacity building efforts in schools in Ontario have taken root and promising improvements in student achievement are certainly evident in recent provincial data trends. Graduation rates have improved and credit recovery and credit salvaging processes have enabled students who were at high risk for not completing credits to meet with success. A particular focus on secondary outcomes through the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success initiative has been very impactful and is now nested in a larger frame of the student achievement using a K to 12 frame. The good news for those involved in reform efforts within our province and internationally is that good teachers make a difference, especially for students who enter classrooms with lower levels of achievement (Marshall, 2009). Thus, building the capacity of teachers in order to help students become more successful is a direction that continues to resonate for school leaders in our province. It is timely to note that "the strongest effects on student learning appear to take place when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers" (Hattie, 2009, p. 22). In other words, teachers examining their own and collective practice critically to hone their skills while their students become more closely involved in self, peer and teacher assessment processes improves both student achievement and teacher efficacy. Teacher efficacy develops when teachers feel they can make a difference and efficacy builds a sense of resiliency and confidence.

However, while education is provided in a social setting and involves a great collective effort, we must remember that learning is ultimately a very personal journey for all of us. No matter where the setting, systemic leadership in today's reform contexts need to create the conditions that make the personal learning journeys of those charged to teach others - powerful and fulfilling. The return on teacher investment has proven to be great as we see motivated and empowered teachers seeking to make learning more fulfilling and meaningful for students.

As we consider how to build teacher efficacy in a reform environment where teacher learning is highly valued and anticipated, as an educator who works with both elementary and secondary schools, I feel strongly that it is important to consider the foundational conditions for effective learning. What conditions for learning help to build a culture where the moral purpose of our task is clear and our efforts to move forward sustainable? Over a decade ago Ron Brandt discussed ten powerful conditions for learning that are as relevant today as they were when he released his publication (Brandt, 1998). These conditions, while simply stated, are quite profound and do not project a single pathway to success. Indeed, we know there

needs to be multiple pathways to success as we have diverse learners to consider. However, the conditions for learning bear specific scrutiny. My intent in this article is to consider the conditions for learning that Brandt identified (in italics below) and I reflect on how they apply to the present educational context for teacher learning. This topic is very personally relevant for me. As Superintendent of Curriculum and Instructional Services in the York Region District School Board, a large school board just north of Toronto, Ontario, facilitating learning is at the core of my own quest for efficacy and our Board's work as a collective.

1. *People learn what is personally meaningful to them.*

Excellent staff development processes help learners to discover the relevance of their work and to make important connections to their personal and professional lives. While professional learning appears to be increasingly deprivatized, it still needs to be personally meaningful. Active, goal-directed and relevant work is simply more motivating and energizing. For example, engaging students in work that integrates the use of digital literacies today is relevant to the lives students are living outside of our classrooms and teachers on the cutting edge are capitalizing on this new reality. Is it not time to examine more critically how digital literacies can better connect our adult learners within and across schools – and across educational jurisdictions? As learners, engagement increases when personal interests and needs overlap. Technologies as tools to facilitate teaching, learning, connections and communication will need intentional and sustainable integration into our school systems for all school stakeholders as we move forward.

Leaders often speak about the goal for increased student achievement as the driver of school improvement processes. It is when we see the faces of students we know are struggling in that moral purpose that the relevance of our work speaks to us as individuals. It is when we help teachers who have struggled with change now feel connected to reform efforts that positive attitudes towards new expectations become internalized as part of professional responsibility and not just as a part of 'accountability'. Thus, the areas of co-teaching, coaching, mentoring, consulting and collaborating have taken on deeper meanings with our growing experience with job-embedded professional learning. These areas of personal skill building are now well served with an intentional focus within pre-service education programs as well as staff development processes. We have moved significantly beyond sharing curricular implementation strategies in our improvement strategies in schools. Our support departments, Curriculum and Instructional Services, Student Support Services (Special Education) and Leadership Development are highly focussed on learning processes for students, teachers and administrators. At the same time, superintendents in the field are similarly focussed on mobilizing new learning across schools and across classrooms. The relevance of what is being learned for the individuals concerned still needs to be at the heart of the exercise to actually make a difference for students.

2. *People learn when they accept challenging but achievable goals.*

This condition reminds me of the importance of setting high expectations for learners while supporting them through challenges. Scaffolding learning is a way of supporting both students and staff as they approach new skill development. Breaking down challenging work into manageable pieces builds confidence and increases our desire to take on more as learners. Setting the goal bar high, while tempering systemic expectations realistically in terms of the time needed to demonstrate growth, requires sensitive leadership. When teachers discover

how they can make a difference in the achievement of their students, this positive experience builds on itself like a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is when learners sense that high expectations are set for them because leaders believe in them that stretching for personal and collective success increases. As an element of our core literacy strategy, in the York Region District School Board, the evolution of learning networks has created safe arenas for creating professional community and challenging the state of present classroom practice. Teacher and administrative representatives from five or six schools, for example, meet regularly to inquire about questions of specific practice. In networks, participants probe, question, analyze, propose and support their specific questions of inquiry as a collective and as school teams based on shared analysis of school data and teacher and administrator learning needs. Learners are helping each other learn in this process as well as learning on behalf of each other. The development of professional learning communities propelled our journey towards learning networks and our board's experience can substantiate that intellectual challenge for teachers with intentional support are two key elements in creating powerful conditions for learning for all concerned. Learning has increased for each stakeholder in the process: the curriculum consultant who supports a network dialogue; the teacher leader charged to support other teachers as they take new skills back to their school; the principal who has increased their knowledge of instruction through this process and the superintendent who now inquires about instruction gain with a greater understanding themselves about the issues of implementation.

3. Learning is developmental.

Teachers begin their careers as novices and through a process of different experiences and socialization within their profession are soon able mentor other new teachers. Those whose learning is supported carefully and appropriately gain transferable skills. However, we must respect the development teachers need as they mature into the profession. Deeper forms of learning take time. In the same way that the learning of our students needs to be considered part of a developmental continuum, precision and personalization in today's reform context takes on particular meaning when one adds the lens of developmental stages of growth for the educators. In our development of learning networks, the time needed to solidify relationships in order to open classroom doors or to expose school data to those in another school, or to build trust to a level where one can critique another, has been substantial. Growth is a process and not marked in a linear way for both students and teachers. New teachers require different developmental milestones than experienced teachers but both remain learners regarding school improvement processes throughout their career and both groups benefit from collaborative work.

4. Individuals learn differently.

Acknowledging that individuals learn differently, adds a layer of complexity to the notion of 'learning expectations'. This important element reinforces our direction towards differentiated responses to the assessment data that teachers glean on a daily basis. In the York Region District School Board, we stress that the informal data that a teacher amasses daily must be valued as much as our more formal data collection vehicles such as system data collections or provincial bench marking assessments. Data is more than numbers. It is uncovering the learning styles of our learners. It involves honing our skills of observation, our skills of conversation with learners and reflecting on the profile of the learner as we grow in our understanding of learner strengths, needs and interests. In the same way that staff must

invest energies to meet their students where they are, so must those who organizing professional learning. Conditions which encourage the growth of self-awareness of teachers set the stage for deeper learning. We must also respect the fact that our teaching forces represent a continuum of teacher experiences, ages, areas of expertise and different stages of professional growth. We aspire to be a collective with a shared understanding of what good teaching is all about but the individuals within the collective will always be somewhat subjective in the interpretation of that growing understanding. Our professional collective depends on the actions and interactions of individuals to move learning forward.

5. People construct new knowledge by building on their current knowledge.

Affirming the knowledge that each staff member brings to a learning table is an important beginning point of any venture into additional learning or professional development. It remains critical to develop relational trust and build motivation in collaborative work (Planche, 2008). We are attempting to refine skill sets in assessment, differentiated instruction and a responsive approach to learner needs in our present educational context. It is not in the clinical application of an assessment vehicle that the learning takes place, but in the reflection and discussion afterwards with colleagues that learning is optimized. It is within the conversations initiated by opportunities to engage in teacher collaborations, in common planning times, in the development of rubrics across a grade or in the constructions of assessments with colleagues and/or students that prior knowledge is activated and new knowledge is created together. Using a constructivist lens acknowledges that it is the learner who does the learning and it is the facilitator who can assist by creating enabling conditions for learning (Planche, 2004). We can set the stage for learning but it is the learner who finds the patterns in their learning which are personally meaningful and who integrates new learning into their growing understanding of 'what is known'.

6. Much learning occurs through social interaction.

Active, sustained learning opportunities allow teachers to transform their teaching especially if these learning opportunities are spread out over time and sustained by regular interaction (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). High quality professional development in today's context does not often include the one-off workshop but rather it is recognized in giving support over time. The notion of coaching in my own school board, is gaining ground and is being recognized as an important skill set for many stakeholders including our literacy teachers. We see it in the interaction of peers meeting peers where they are and helping each other take steps forward through a social interaction process and coaching as a skill set is now reaping significant benefit. The notion of distributed leadership is evident in our evolving teacher leaders. There will always be the need to share information and specific workshops can do that. However, new and evolving structures for learning like case management sessions, or collaborative analysis of student work opportunities or teacher moderation sessions offer teachers opportunities for dialogue, analysis, collaboration, collegial coaching and personal support. As Darling-Hammond and Richardson contend, professional development which allows teachers to acquire new knowledge, apply it in practice, and reflect on its results with colleagues has been showed by research to be more effective and sustainable (2009). Episodic or fragmented "training" is of limited use to teachers and not easily applied because it lacks meaningful social interaction as a support mechanism.

7. People need feedback to learn.

When I consider feedback as a learning tool myself, I am always brought back to my experience learning a new skill such as driving a car, or learning to play a new sport. My practice was essential in the development of a sense of competence. Each effort to practice had within the experience an opportunity to glean feedback. When an instructor was involved my learning significantly increased if the instructor was explicit in his or her description of my performance, timely with comments and examples of how to do better while supportive in approach, helping me define next steps in an encouraging way. It was the objective yet supportive driving instructor who helped me gain confidence and who supported my practice in a fashion that was scaffolded. Lessons involved opportunities to review growing skills with pieces of new learning added as each lesson proceeded. My Dad was a wonderful man who wisely signed me up for driving lessons soon after reflecting on our first efforts to work together as teacher and learner. It was the feedback while the learning was forming that was most effective for me.

The move towards an emphasis on formative assessment or assessment for learning holds much promise for teacher learning as well as student learning. Learning is about making meaning or "self-regulation" as Susan Brookhart discusses (2008 p. 3). When we receive external feedback, our internal feedback mechanisms affect our own growing knowledge bank as well as our beliefs and feelings about that learning. We can't 'make' any one learn anything but our feedback from others affects what we feed back to ourselves. Ultimately, what we internalize and control as a part of our own thought processes is crucial to more learning. If our working cultures ask us to always 'get it right' then if something needs improvement, we often internalize that something must 'be wrong'. We want to shift this paradigm from perceptions of right or wrong to learning as a constant and improvement as a process. Susan Brookhart's publication, "How to give effective feedback to students" is as applicable to teacher learning as it is to how teachers interact with students and promote student learning (2008). Those supporting teacher growth must find ways to give feedback that is constructive and timely and which varies in its mode and its delivery. How feedback is given impacts teacher motivation, learning and engagement. The specificity of feedback influences learning directly as well as helps to determine next steps for moving forward. Feedback which helps to form learning is the ultimate goal. Evaluation, while a necessary structure, often does little to actually form learning. Shall we spend the bulk of our time as teacher developers enabling learning or on 'weighing it'?

8. *Successful learning involves the use of strategies – which themselves are learned.*

Teachers quickly learn that placing students in groups without teaching any strategies as to how to work together effectively is of limited use to student learning. Co-operative learning is a well known concept with complex strategies and knowledge behind its application in the classroom. Expecting teachers to deliver a successful literacy program which is balanced in its delivery and responsive to the strengths, needs and interests of students requires the development of many specific skills and the application of many complex strategies. Our learning is enhanced when it is done in a social context but there are discrete strategies that must be supported as teachers develop their classroom repertoire for curricular planning, delivery and assessment and evaluation. Those charged to support teacher growth cannot just 'tell' or mandate superior delivery. Those who support teacher growth at the system, school or classroom level must illuminate purpose, model how to begin, coach practice as it grows and assess with learners how to refine and extend learning. Job embedded learning best serves this complex process and this requires systems to consider how resources are

allocated and staffing decisions are made. Job embedded learning supports require leaders to be learners alongside those they support.

Humility amongst decision makers is at the core of any excellent education system and system leaders must remember that teachers are often their own best teachers. Those who have experienced developing common assessments across subject areas or grades with other professionals speak highly about the benefits of this kind of interaction and report that it can be a very deep learning process once a team has developed a collaborative working culture. The development of common assessments, for example, allows for the exploration of content knowledge, the development and reinforcement of learning strategies in teaching and assessment and the refinement of shared understandings of levels of performance amongst students. It is a good example of fruitful work that can develop within a working culture and where support from outside the learning circle can be strategically applied. Simply stated, at times leaders just have to get out of the way once they have provided the time and supports to the learning process itself.

9. A positive emotional climate strengthens learning.

Foundational to any classroom or working setting where learning will flourish is the establishment of a culture where learners feel respected, acknowledged and affirmed. How learners feel about learning affects how they will learn. Emotions are at the heart of learning and so are relationships within schools. One must consider the role of power, position and issues of compliance in the relationships that evolve in schools (Planche, 2004). The relationships within schools impact the development of learning cultures. Culture as a normative glue can be both a source of strength and restraint. As Ken Leithwood and his co-authors pointed out, the transformation of practice appears strongly related to the transformation of relationships within schools (Leithwood, Janzi & Steinbach, 1999). Involving teachers as partners in the way structures, forms and content of how professional development is organized, sustained and evaluated is a way to deepen learning conversations and increase teacher commitments to improvement. Stronger working relationships help to weather the storms that inevitably arise when work dilemmas need to be addressed. Developing the efficacy of our teaching population is crucial. An uncertain sense of teacher efficacy appears to inhibit the development of trusting professional relationships. (Leonard, 1999) Most educators have experienced the swift derailing of collaborative projects when significant distrust surfaces in the mix. And yet, schools cannot avoid conflict in collaborative efforts to facilitate learning. The ability to build bridges across dissenting views is a crucial capacity that all now educators require. Strong interpersonal and communication skills are the underpinning of building positive climates for learning and absolutely crucial for those in leadership positions.

10. Learning is influenced by the total environment.

It is in the dynamic interplay of these conditions for powerful learning that change and growth are optimal. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts to coin a popular expression. Daniel Johnson writes about four pillars which underpin the development of a learning environment which will sustain educational change and the development of educational quality: purpose, parameters, principles and priorities (2005, p. 172).

While he applies this frame to student achievement, I find it applicable to teacher learning as

well:

- a. Purpose – Why is a particular area of teacher learning important? We must be clear on what we need to learn as professionals and why it is essential?
- b. Parameters – How will we make day to day decisions that create quality schools for teachers and students? How we will ensure the supports to nurture success are in place?
- c. Principles – How will we hold ourselves accountable for the learning – as school systems, as learners?
- d. Priorities – How will our data help us to prioritize learning goals? What will success look like? What will we identify as evidence of that success?

A learning organization, Ron Brandt suggested, continuously refines its basic processes to move towards improvement (1998, p. 75). In Ontario, we are moving towards developing cultures of inquiry in our schools, asking critical questions about how teacher practice impacts learning outcomes and supporting teacher and administrative growth as a way to transform our learning environments. As we go deeper in addressing systemic inequities in student achievement, our educational contexts are uncovering increasing complexities. The need for a highly skilled teaching force in Ontario has never been greater. While the future possibilities for enhanced teacher learning are great, the foundational conditions for learning remain deeply rooted in what we know about our human condition. Learners need to find relevance and meaning in their learning to develop the intrinsic motivation to engage in deeper ways. The ten powerful conditions for learning as suggested by Brandt reinforce the need for the structures within our educational systems to nurture and sustain learner growth at all levels. Investing in the learning of all will reap long term benefits for teachers as professionals but most of all for our students. Ultimately, students deserve educators in their schools who believe in themselves as well as each other and who are committed facilitating student success and their own learning every school day.

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