



Professional Learning
Research
Innovation

Learning in Practice

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About the Barker Institute:

- Provides a centre for research, reflective practice, professional learning and innovation in education
- Is a resource hub that facilitates the ongoing development of learning for teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of emerging practice, constantly striving to refine the quality of teaching and learning
- Looks to develop collaborative ventures with other institutions and providers, initiating research and innovation combined with the implementation of new projects and programs for the benefit of students, staff and the broader community
- Shares current research and issues with parents, professional bodies and educators around the globe through ongoing symposia, forums, lectures and conferences

About the Learning in Practice Journal:

As a leader in Christian education, Barker College aims to both demonstrate and inform best practice. This journal was developed to showcase a range of initiatives and research projects from across the School. It explains the rationale behind innovations in practice and archives pivotal developments in Barker's academic, co-curricular and pastoral realms.

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Dr Brad Merrick is currently Director of Research in Learning and the Barker Institute. His PhD examined the influence of motivation and self-regulation on student understanding and learning. He has co-authored several music textbooks combined with scholarly chapters, articles and papers that explore emerging approaches to teaching and learning, most recently in the 'Oxford Handbook of Music Education' and 'The Routledge Companion to Music, Technology and Education'. He is the immediate Past Chair of the National Executive of the Australian Society for Music Education. His passion is examining new research, pedagogy and emerging practice in education.

Reflections on the College of Teachers' Inaugural year



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Abstract

A central tenet in professional learning is to engage staff in self-reflection of their own practice using a peer-coaching model within a College of Teachers (COT) structure, where staff could nominate or be nominated to be trained as coaches and to work with colleagues across the School (Pre-K to Year 12). The COT model draws on the 'Growth Mindset' work of Dweck (2006), seeking to develop professional learning and personal growth from a positive frame of reference rather than a deficit approach. Key reference areas include setting professional learning goals, referencing current practice and then seeking opportunities for improvement. This paper explores the reflections of COT members after a year of involvement in the program.

Background to the Study and the College of Teachers

As senior staff reflected on the role of the COT within the school and the emerging thinking and literature about 'collaborative professional learning' (Sharrat and Planche, 2016), the importance of connecting with ongoing research data was further highlighted, so the Barker Institute looked to examine the efficacy of the COT through engagement with the existing members. During 2016, the Barker Institute engaged in a reflective process to evaluate the initial success and validity of the coaching framework and its implementation. The methodology employed to collect data from the members of the COT included ongoing semi-structured discussions at meetings and utilising group reflection protocols. These were combined with individual reflection sheets throughout the year which included specific target areas of the COT program.

In its first year, the staff co-ordinating the work of the Barker Institute and the College of Teachers reviewed the training and implementation by examining this data for emerging themes. Where appropriate, these personnel and the COT Lead Coach across the School also provided their own perspectives and insights on innovative approaches to practice that could be offered as adjuncts to the coaching process. These included the provision of regular shared 'open-lessons' for observations, the creation of small professional learning groups for discussion about pedagogy, the trialling of the coaching process across the school with willing participants and, where possible, the ongoing collection of feedback and data from staff.

Overview of the research methodology

The research that underpins this case study employed a mixed methodology including protocols such as survey, semi-structured discussion and open-ended questionnaires. These types of collection tools are best aligned with an educational innovation (similar to action research) that encourages ongoing collection of data through reflection which then reshapes the focus and clarity of engagement (Mills and Butroyd, 2014). By employing a range of different, contextualised approaches to data collection and thematic analysis, the rich nature of the experience was highlighted and annotated effectively amidst the busy schedules of the teaching staff involved.

Overview of the data collected and analysed

There were a range of data collected within the reflection process which was analysed thematically to assist the professional learning community of the School as it moved into the next phase of the COT. Responses were organised and presented to highlight key areas of collective thinking for the N=45 participants.

Overarching comments such as: "It is good to see a Growth Model being used to develop awareness of other staff across the School" and "We are now able to build relationships that lead to trust", highlighted the initial positive impact of the professional learning opportunities that were made available through the COT.

The responses from staff continually referenced that the opportunity to work alongside their peers in a non-threatening, supportive environment was the most valuable outcome of the process. Participants consistently noted that this process allowed them to see the professional practice of teaching through a different and sometimes contrasting lens. They often alluded to the variance in learning levels and subjects observed, emphasising that the emerging 'Growth Model' used by the School fosters strong cross-curriculum interaction and dialogue. In analysing the responses from participants, the key thematic areas they valued from the COT were:

- Professional conversations and improved communication
- Empowering staff and celebrating success in others
- Encouraging and supportive atmosphere
- Building relationships
- Developing open, positive and collegial classrooms
- Increased capacity to listen and to reflect on practice
- Opportunities to observe a range of teaching styles
- Using a model that was both affirming and non-threatening
- Opportunities to set professional goals related to practice and reflection
- Situations to learn about and manage difficult conversations

Similar to other innovations in a crowded education setting, participants highlighted the need to be aware of the structural and operational nuances of a school that can inhibit access to professional learning opportunities. This was particularly important to provide participants the very best chance to collaborate in learning from one another. Comments such as “We need to look at the timetable and align coaching with available periods” and suggestions such as “We need to consider the structural aspects of the School and make it a whole school professional learning target” highlighted the need to be aware of the environmental changes needed as educational innovations are embedded in school settings.

The data and subsequent findings also reinforced that the overarching Growth Model used by the College of Teachers is an appropriate framework. Although only based on limited surveys and group reflections, the data presented suggests that participants consider that the COT has fostered a clear basis for dialogue and engagement in purposeful reflection, focusing on the coaching-mentoring process and the development of professional conversations.

Several participants also suggested that the COT should be a central dimension in the professional learning goals of the School. It would appear that there is a perceived congruence of the COT with the whole-school mission and purpose that offers a strong sense of ‘reciprocity’ which is an important aspect in this collaborative process wherein the leaders and believers (staff) of the organisation feel that they are receiving mutual benefits for their efforts while demonstrating sensitivity to the possible power balances that may exist (Sharratt and Planche, 2016).

Many staff referenced the increased sense of capacity, skill and confidence they have gained from their initial involvement highlighting the following skill areas that they had become aware of and fostered:

- Development of trust with other professionals
- The ability to be fully present in a conversation with a colleague
- Increased emotional connection with others in a professional context
- The ability to treat others as equals
- The ability to find common ground with others
- The capacity to praise others

These attributes are all specifically related to the collaborative process and they highlight how the notion of ‘collective efficacy’ and collaboration are integral skills to develop in a coaching framework harnessed within the COT.

Importantly, the data also provided key reference points for reflection and recalibration as the Barker Institute looks to continue implementing this model of professional learning in 2017. These findings are more ‘operational’ in their focus, often alluding to structural or design considerations within the overall organisation. A number of key suggestions were referenced in the data, providing significant insights for staff overseeing the project to reshape future iterations of the COT process. Crucial suggestions from staff included:

- Provision of connecting staff with others who have specific subject or educational experiences. In response, a College of Teachers’ Directory has been created and published for access across the 220 teaching staff;

- Increased allocation of time for staff to meet, observe and coach staff members. Since this request, availability of some period release time has been offered while also assisting staff to align more closely with those who may have similar breaks in their teaching timetables;
- Opportunity to review the process continually and to share both the positives and negatives from the experience. Since receiving this data, regular meetings of all COT members are held each term with specific areas of focus and discussion relative to reflection and teaching practice;
- Greater access to time. This has been tabled for consideration as the School expands its size and plans for the full implementation of co-education from PreK-12 in the future within the specific reference area researching 'Shape of the Day' considerations.

Outcomes of the approach

In an educational environment where teachers are expected continually to refine their practice and to modify their teaching to suit the needs of learners best, the College of Teachers' innovation has filled an important space in the suite of professional learning activities offered to staff at Barker College. As highlighted in the data, there has been a positive response to the COT, particularly the reflective focus and shared learning opportunities it has provided. By aligning the provision of the COT with emerging research and a sustained level of access through the Barker Institute, the qualitative data would suggest that staff are placing a high value on the relationships that this experience is providing for them.

As externally provided professional learning opportunities have become so diverse and inaccessible to many staff due to cost and level of access, it is apparent that an in-house, shared coaching experience, firmly centred around ongoing feedback and reflection, has been well received within the School. Given the number of participants (N=45) and the increasing interest in the process across the campus, schools need strongly to consider the provision and design of professional learning for their teaching communities and to create opportunities that provide increased context and relevance for their staff. It would appear that in contextualising professional learning in the school-based environment, there is large degree of authenticity and connection for staff as it has value and personal worth to the participants. Edwards and Martin highlight "one measure of a profession is how it looks after its own" (2016, p.45) and it would appear that the COT experience is catering for the needs of the staff at the School.

Conclusions and recommendations

The collective findings and reflection of participants are strongly aligned with Robinson's (2015) suggestion that "effective practitioners need continuing opportunities for professional development to refresh their own creative practices and to keep pace with related development policy practice and research more generally" (p.127). Participants have certainly enjoyed the involvement and the opportunity to look beyond their own subject or stage level in the classroom.

The data collected has indicated that staff have the capacity and propensity to engage in professional learning that is both personalised, shared and relevant. Most importantly, these findings suggest the need to provide a supportive environment in which to engage collaboratively. Although initial data has highlighted strong support for the COT, the findings have identified the need continually to reassess the design and implementation of such an initiative, given the ongoing changes in the day-to-day operational structures and demands on staff which, in turn, impact upon engagement in professional learning opportunities. At all times, it is important to remember that a school is a 'living organism' and that flexibility is needed to ensure the longevity and success of any educational innovation in the 21st Century.

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