

The power of networking

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I've been a teacher now since dinosaurs roamed the earth. I sometimes think they still do (we all know who I mean don't we.). In all that time, I've suffered various forms of government torture of the kind that's told me that as a member of the teaching profession I am, by definition, failing, deficient and behind the times; perhaps even slightly untrustworthy. I've never known a government policy that really focused on what really makes a difference in schools: teachers. Allowing them space to grow and develop their practice – to reflect and collaborate. Governments seem fixated, perhaps understandably, at a macro level, thinking that if they force uniform change on systems that will create change in the classroom. Of course, we know it doesn't.

Much of the literature on teaching will tell you what a solitary, pressured pursuit it is; a treadmill of frenzied existence with little time to eat lunch let alone reflect on developing your practice. And it can be like this, especially if we allow others to shape the agenda. But how do we shape the agenda for ourselves? We network of course! We do what intelligent humans have done for generations and we pool our knowledge, we shape new understandings and we support each other. People have always done this, but it might have been ad hoc or perhaps not well supported by the organisations people work in.

Those of you who know me even only slightly, will know I have a bit of a thing for quotations and sayings. A favourite of mine is the Japanese proverb “all of us are smarter than any of us”. For me that describes well the buzzing powerhouse of knowledge that networking unleashes. It comes from the strength of moral purpose that we feel as teachers. However, as Michael Fullan said, moral purpose without agency is just martyrdom (1993). If our approach to leading change is like putting a foot in a stream - remove it and everything returns to how it was - then, despite our best efforts, we are likely to become burned out. It's too much for any one of us to handle alone.

Thank god then for HertsCam. It has developed a structure for networking that makes it massively more effective, whether that's between two colleagues, a department, a school, over Hertfordshire or across Europe. Where other approaches focus on a deficit model, an urgent 'fix it' approach, HertsCam focuses on development that really makes a difference. For us it isn't about 'doing a course' – it's about changing mindsets. It is about questioning what it is to be a teacher today. It gives us opportunities, the collaborative power and the sense of moral authority to create positive change for the benefit of our students. As a teacher, that gets my vote every time.

HertsCam harnesses this sleeping giant, to make all our efforts count; to really change schools and change lives. But this isn't just a minority interest club for like-minded souls; it challenges and re-focuses entire schools on what makes the most difference. Being part of the HertsCam network is the single most effective thing a school can do to transform capacity. Why? Because it creates a learning community and increases the effectiveness, well-being and happiness of the members of that community. I know this because I've seen it in my own school. Ten years ago I knew I had to get people talking about teaching and learning – today I hear those conversations every day. Why? Because enquiry, tweaking practice and sharing ideas has been adopted as 'the way we do things around here' – not by accident and not by edict, but by providing people with the opportunities to do what they have always wanted to do: share their practice.

Grossman et al. said "schools won't be exciting places for children until they're exciting places for adults" (2000:38) and HertsCam supports that through its emphasis on networking. We gain confidence and develop creativity through sharing our ideas with others. We experience the support to take risks and encouragement to consult widely. That's healthy, fulfilling and profoundly democratic.

There is a need to guard against the danger that we might only see our patch of the garden that we're cultivating. Because we're busy we may not take the time often enough to step back, stretch the aching muscles and survey the wider terrain. We may feel that our development work is quite modest and insignificant, but I want to remind you that it's anything but. The cumulative impact of the work of everyone in this room is having the most incredible impact on the lives of students, on the thinking of academics and even the shaping of countries. Today I invite you to let go of the modesty and celebrate being an essential part of this extraordinary organisation.

HertsCam, through the International Teacher Leadership project (Frost, 2011), has supported partners in over 15 countries, enabling them to use teacher leadership as a way of embedding a democratic way of thinking amongst the people who have most influence over shaping the future – their teachers. Our involvement in a range of international conferences and events is spreading the word that teacher leadership is a part of the job for all, not a title for the few. Our publications are getting across the message that it doesn't take millions of pounds and a think-tank to create change – refreshingly, it's one of the few things in life where we can say 'It's much more simple than that!'

Why does sharing work so powerfully? Because between us we have oodles of knowledge about teaching, about what works and doesn't. Our instincts and experience are honed beyond any textbook or manual. When we don't network it sits in silos, untapped and, in

what I call the Titanic method of education - it all goes down with the ship at the end of the voyage. Networking brings all that tacit knowledge, those half realised nuggets, and more into the light of day so that it can be processed and used consciously, critically and reflectively. There's a kind of alchemy in this: it creates more than the sum of its parts and enriches all who have been part of it.

I have learned from a lifetime of teaching this lesson: give a teacher half a chance to learn something new and they're in there like a starving man at an all-you-can-eat buffet. They have the healthiest disregard for the nonsense promulgated by a string of education secretaries and they persist in doing the one thing that really makes a difference: developing and sharing classroom practice. It's this commitment to our students that drives our sense of moral purpose and gives us boundless energy. I count myself privileged to know you and many others who are endlessly committed to making a difference to the children in their care. Seeing so many of you here on a Saturday morning is impressive. When I hear the passionate debate and see the real hunger for learning at events such as these, I am humbled and moved every time.

I have pages and pages of testimony about the impact of networking, but I will always remember the comment of a newly qualified teacher who, having experienced a year of networking and collaborative practice, said "This seems a bold statement, but I have learned that small fish can make big ripples at times".

Networking is about being powerful, contributing and creating good in the world. Let's turn those ripples into tidal waves, people!

References

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