PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FROM THE INSIDE – learning professionally in a boarding context

> *To create change first create a sense of urgency .. .*(attributed to John Kotter)

That professional learning is important is not for contestation. It is a learning and improvement tool; a vehicle to change direction in a boarding house; to strengthen practice; or put simply - to make things better for the students in our care. Yet implied in the notion of learning, is change. We don't always do change well or easily.

> I need not remind you that change is hard. So hard that of the
> 600 000 Americans who have bypass surgery every year, 90%
> do not change their lifestyles even though it will eventually
> kill them. It seems to some people that the threat of death is
> not a strong enough motivation to change habits. (source unknown)

 Nonetheless professional learning is one key to improving practice and making change in our boarding houses. Invariably we equate professional learning with off-site learning and fail to give due attention to the way in which we can address learning opportunities 'within' our boarding houses and schools. We fail to consider the importance of participant agency or choice within their learning and we also fail to dedicate time for appropriate learning. In short, we fail to exploit the opportunities for learning and hence for change and improvement within our boarding houses. As such we fail the students in our care; because we all have the potential to do things better.

Yet we persist with a model of 'drive-by' (Mockler, 2004 as cited in Kriewaldt, 2008, p.4) professional learning which sees us spray on our learning, a little like a fake tan, and expect change to occur. We persist in using the term professional development which is derived from a deficit view of learning, implying that participants need something done to them, rather than participants need to engage in the learning process actively and reflectively. In fact if we give consideration to our motives to attend this conference, how would we rate them?

- My choice

- Directive or suggestion from 'above'

- Networking

- Confirm my practice

- Challenge my practice

- To walk away with greater confidence in my role

Each participant will gain enormously from attendance at this conference, simply by a heightened sense of professionalism and professional connectedness, yet this alone will not change or improve practices within the Boarding Houses in which you lead. In fact, we erroneously believe that attendance at workshops and conferences is about learning, my contention is that learning only takes place upon return to one's work context where reflection, sharing of knowledge with colleagues and the planning and implementation of

new ideas occurs, where time, real time is allocated to the embedding of new ideas and the generation of new learning.

Researchers have identified clear signposts for effective professional learning that is learning which leads to changes in practice and the generation of new ideas. Consider the work of Darling-Hammond (1999) and Newmann, King & Youngs, (2000)who identify good professional learning as:

- Job-embedded
- Ongoing
- In depth
- Content focussed
- Collaborative
- Encourages reflective thinking

Academic and researcher Christopher Day works in the field of teacher professional learning yet the parallels with boarding staff irrespective of background are evident. He identifies 'teacher agency' or choice and decision-making in learning as fundamental to improvement in practice. Day (1999) contends that change is unlikely to occur without evidence of teacher agency within decision-making processes. He outlines three precepts about development and change, stating that:

1. PD is not something that can be forced, because it is the teacher who develops (actively) and not the teacher who is developed (passively).

2. Change which is not internalised is likely to be cosmetic, 'token' and temporary.

3. Change at deeper sustained levels involves the modification or transformation of values, attitudes, emotions and perceptions which inform practice, and these are unlikely to occur unless there is participation in, and a sense of ownership in the decision-making change process. (Day 1999, pp. 97 – 98)

The challenge for leaders in boarding houses is how to reimagine time or at least how to reconfigure it to allow for real, regular and relevant staff professional learning. It is not enough to outsource our learning, it is not sufficient for some to have learning opportunities and not for others if we are serious about improving the quality of the boarding experience for our students and their families. Even small collaborative projects with staff to solve problems in practice, policy implementation and protocols provide effective professional learning. A simple but effective approach to problem-solving is as follows:

1. What is the outcome we are seeking?
2. What is the simplest way to achieve this outcome?
3. How do we implement this solution?
4. How will we know that we have been successful?

Of course, there are dozens of other ways leaders can lead learning within their own context:- engagement of critical friends, undertaking duty of care training, conducting surveys and analysing data, presentations by experts in areas where knowledge is needed (eg. student emotional health and well-being) or simply visiting colleagues boarding

houses. Yet none of these will be effective unless we begin to view post-learning with the same reverence as we do workshops or conferences. Without time for reflection, sharing and planning for implementation professional learning experiences will remain a nice sojourn into swelling our sense of professional identity and connectedness which are important but not practice-changing by-products. So, if we are here to learn how to do our job better, then we need to work better with our staff and one way to do that is through professional learning, collaboratively. Context matters. Collaboration matters. These are at the basis of learning for change. Professional learning that leads to change must be contextual, shared, collaborative, reflective, job-embedded.

What will you do with that learning when you return? When will you reflect upon it? When will you share it? How will you implement it/influence others to implement it? So how do we better professional learning for our staff when change is hard and considering that without a sense of urgency we will continue to do what we have always done and gain the outcomes that we have always got?

A final challenge:

In what areas or topics does your staff most need professional learning?

1.

2.

3.

How will you address this learning from within your own context, so that participants have choice, agency and decision-making within the process and so that our students will gain from the learning we undertake, collaboratively? How will you find and make time in an environment where time is often our most precious commodity? How can you afford not to?

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