

Building a Culture of Thinking and Learning

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There is no doubt that the educational landscape is changing, and changing rapidly.

We inhabit a world where information about everything and anything is accessible at the push of a button. If the internet allows us to access information in seconds, what are the implications for the classroom and what we should be teaching students? In answering this question, I am drawn back to my fundamental beliefs about what makes for a powerful education: an education that will set students up for life. These beliefs have been strongly influenced by my own learning experiences and by substantial educational research from leading universities around the world. While much research acknowledges the importance of fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, findings increasingly point to the need to nurture those dispositions that will allow students to become active learners and effective thinkers – eager and able to create, innovate and solve problems – all within a critical and ethical framework.

Researcher at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Ron Richhart, paints the ideal portrait of a student emerging from school to take their place in the world as that of an “engaged and active



thinker, able to communicate, innovate, collaborate and problem solve.” Rather than producing students who possess a discrete set of knowledge or who sit passively waiting to be fed the information they need to pass the test, our goal must be to develop in students the dispositions they need for life beyond our school gates.

In his most recent book, *Futurewise*, David Perkins (Harvard Graduate School of Education) argues the case for schools to become places where students are prepared “for the lives they are going to lead”. He challenges readers to think about the shifts that need to take place in schools if understanding and application of skills and knowledge, rather than the acquisition of knowledge, become the goals of education. Furthermore, he invites readers to challenge the ‘old’ story of school and learning, to evaluate the ‘current’ story, and to reimagine a ‘new’



story: one that more effectively addresses the needs of students and prepares them for their lives ahead.

If we look back at our own education, what is the 'story of learning' that has endured? Is it the 'traditional' story of teacher as the gatekeeper to knowledge, transmitter of information and wisdom? A story about conformity, compliance, wooden desks in rows, facing the front, silence, anonymity, working from textbooks, remembering facts, figures and formulas, and tests of memory? Can we imagine a different story: a story where the student, rather than the teacher, is the hero of the narrative, where he or she is at the centre of the action, actively engaged and participating in the thinking and learning opportunities provided?

The enactment of such a narrative requires teachers to invest time learning about and reflecting on contemporary research, collaboratively reimagining, and thinking about a 'new' story of learning and how this will unfold in each classroom. Teachers will need to come together to create and develop curriculum around thinking, inquiry and student engagement: a curriculum that is more relevant to the lives our

students are going to live. They will need to adopt pedagogies and approaches to learning that value and actively promote student thinking. Bringing this 'new' story of learning to life will be a demanding venture and one that will require perseverance, dedication, collegiality and leadership.

Perkins invites readers to wonder about the learning that really matters for today's students. As educators, what do we need to know, understand and be able to do to ensure that we cultivate the environments and opportunities that allow such learning to occur? Of course, literacy and numeracy are the bedrock upon which all other learning is built and we must ensure that they are prioritised, but beyond these essentials in what else should we invest our time?

More than ever, educational researchers are suggesting that what contemporary students need most is the capacity to think – creatively, critically, ethically and collaboratively. We need to build a culture in which student thinking is, as Richhart suggests, "valued, visible and actively promoted" in all classes. Furthermore, if we want to build these cultures of thinking in our classrooms, our teachers

and leaders need to develop the knowledge, skills and understandings that will allow them to nurture these environments.

At St Leonard's College we are committed to building structures that allow teachers to observe each other on a regular basis and provide the opportunity for all teachers to receive constructive feedback on how they are nurturing the learning of their students. Time has been reconfigured to allow teachers to collaborate more frequently. Expectations have been established around teachers adopting innovative approaches and practices, and sharing their experiences with colleagues. Targeted professional learning opportunities have been made available for teachers and leaders so that they can learn more about effective pedagogies and constructive observation and feedback. Video camera infrastructure is now in place that will enable teachers to record themselves and their students in action. This will allow more teachers to have the opportunity to critically examine their practices.

Several of our teachers have also been involved in the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero program. Project Zero was founded by the philosopher Nelson Goodman in 1967 to study and improve education in the arts. Goodman believed that arts learning should be studied as a serious cognitive activity, but that 'zero' had yet been firmly established about the field. In addition to research, Project Zero runs workshops and conferences in cities all around the world. In March this year, 24 teachers from St Leonard's College attended the Melbourne conference. This was an opportunity to learn collaboratively with teachers from other schools, and consider practices that enrich teaching and learning opportunities for students.

"Project Zero was about challenging teachers to be comfortable being uncomfortable – to be pedagogically creative and to have the courage to move beyond the features of traditional education," said English Teacher Catriona Woodford, "I really enjoyed Ron Ritchhart's plenary in which he suggested that changing education is not about constant policy and curriculum shifts, but about changing the culture of the classroom – about moving away from our obsession with content and assessment, and instead considering if we are creating cultures of thinking amongst our students."

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For Junior School Teacher Daniel Dunlevie, "the conference reaffirmed my beliefs that there needs to be a greater focus given to students' critical and creative thinking skills. It has always been an important focus but today's students face a very different workforce where collaboration, communication and thinking skills are essential."

When teachers and leaders engage in action learning that investigates the efficacy of their own practices, then the quality of leading, teaching and learning will improve and students will have every opportunity to leave St Leonard's College well prepared and confident to take on the challenges of the world.