

Adaptive Schools

by Lucinda Wolters

“If we want a change in culture ... the work is to change the conversation — or, more precisely, to have a conversation that we have not had before, one that has the power to create something new in the world.”

Peter Block: *Community: The Structure of Belonging*

As school leaders, our obvious reality is that we face an expectation to implement a significantly redesigned curriculum with a current context of school cultures at various stages of readiness to change. At times, when our efforts do not reap the action from others we hope for, we can find ourselves in situations where the temptation to direct others takes hold, working against the very cultures we hope to create. We may find ourselves feeling powerless, vulnerable, both personally and professionally, and at a loss about how to respond and lead. We may be left wondering, *“How do I do this?”*

Five years ago, I attended a professional development session on *Assessment for Learning*. During the course of the week, I was struck by the quality of our conversations and began to pay attention to the artful facilitation. The days were thoughtfully organized around “triple track agendas” to ensure our professional learning not only applied to ourselves, but also to our teams and to our classroom settings. I observed balanced participation, effective collaboration and a shift in my thinking about professional learning

engagement. When Sandra Herbst, the session leader, referred to the Adaptive Schools (AS) Foundation Seminar as the place where she had learned these skills, I was clear on where I wanted to invest my learning.

Key Learning

The AS approach to school change is based on the work of Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman (2013)*. Once I took the steps to attend the AS Foundation and Advanced Seminars, I experienced key learning about how to support collective change that deeply resonated for me; it not only clarified our current need to embrace less hierarchical change models but also gave me an internal map to envision what we needed to do and how. More specifically, I recognized how critical it is for us to collaboratively examine our beliefs, assumptions and mental models if we want to alter what we do. If we don't invest in this kind of focus, I realized, our attempts to transform education, whether through implementing a new program, a new schedule, or a new curriculum, will be short-lived or superficial, often returning to our default actions, or inaction, embedded in our cultures.

Collectively paying attention to what lies below the surface of our awareness will enable us, over time, to purposefully design our cultures to create lasting change. As leaders, we need to develop new internal maps, skills, tools, and processes to create the contexts for us to safely examine and address deeper levels of awareness. We can do this by skillfully facilitating and engaging in

meaningful conversations. The AS approach certainly provides a road-map for this essential, internal work.

Key Tools & Skills

Equipped with new AS knowledge and back in my day-to-day school work, my increased awareness led to recognizing what normally happens during professional conversations. I noticed a frequent pattern of back and forth advocacy; it appeared that those who were not talking were not really listening. As soon as the opportunity arose, someone would pounce into the conversation to share an alternative idea or a reason why the other person's idea wouldn't work. There was limited time given for pausing or effective, open-ended questioning into ideas. This typical conversational style won't support where we need to go since it keeps the conversation at a superficial level. To go beyond this Ping-pong surface talk, we need to increase skills in balancing advocacy of our ideas with inquiry of others' ideas. The skillful application of the norms of collaboration is a tool to support growth in this area.

Another key observation I had of professional conversations was our tendency to primarily use discussion rather than dialogue. Although the discussions we were trying to have were meant to support collective decision-making to facilitate taking action, we did not use dialogue to create shared understanding first. It became clear to me, from the AS frameworks and processes, that the critical prior work of group dialogue before discussion was often absent. This led to decisions that lacked collective commitment, which, in turn, led to decisions that didn't always stay made; our conversations usually remained status quo, as did our actions. Knowing when and how



We need the ability to engage in two ways of talking, dialogue and discussion, in order to take collective action.

to deliberately engage in dialogue for collective meaning-making, or discussion for collective decision-making is a critical skill to support educational change.

In addition, once I began to facilitate and participate in more meetings, I reflected on what I observed. Besides the lack of conversational skills as mentioned above, the inability for groups to remain on topic was consistent. Although topics were often outlined in agendas, irrelevant comments were frequently made that derailed the meeting. Furthermore, meeting processes weren't being used appropriately, overused, or not evident at all. This led to a lack of engagement and my perception that the conversation mattered little to the larger context. As a result, a great deal of time was being wasted. Considering time is such a limited resource, using the AS Meeting Principles and Standards for clear criteria, is an excellent support for efficiency and productivity.

The AS Foundation Seminar in the Comox Valley

In October 2015, believing so strongly in AS effectiveness, I introduced the four-day Adaptive

*Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (2013), *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*. Plymouth, UK; Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC.



People say they have felt actively involved in decisions and listened to.

Schools Foundation Seminar along with co-presenter John Clarke, to a group of 32 teachers, principals and vice-principals, in the Comox Valley School District. The response to the learning has been overwhelmingly positive. Educators are strongly valuing their learning, enthusiastically believing that the work would move collaboration forward, and recognizing the importance of the AS approach for implementing innovative work. Since then, the AS work has been infused into team meetings, PLC meetings, staff meetings, and professional development sessions, including the Curriculum Implementation days and planning sessions.

A significant theme from the feedback was how participants experienced epiphanies regarding the need for explicit instruction in how to develop or integrate norms of collaboration. Simply posting these norms on the wall would be synonymous with posting reading strategies on the wall of a grade three classroom. Yet, this is our tendency. Through the seminar, the norms were unpacked, modelled, and taught with consistent opportunities for practice.

Response to the AS Seminar

Lisa Pedersen-Skene, as the Professional Development Committee Chair for Comox Valley Teachers, has been responsible for leading many meetings in connection

with educational change. Pedersen-Skene believes we are in a time of learning chaos with our redesigned curriculum, upcoming new reporting orders, and innovative initiatives. Since attending the seminar, she has been using the AS approach and notes increasingly balanced participation, deep and purposeful professional conversations, and collective decision-making. Pedersen-Skene shared that each time she walks away from such a meeting she is moved by the number of people who have felt actively involved in decisions and how they felt listened to. She also acknowledged that many teachers feel the curriculum changes are being done 'to them' and that change needs to have multiple entry points for people; in her view, "a feeling of a 'top down' approach is one of the biggest hindrances in moving learning forward." Through the AS approach, she has been able to provide people with different entry points and been successful.

Gerald Fussell, in his role as District Principal for Innovation and Technology, noticed an improved level of conversation and productivity as a result of using the Adaptive

Schools strategies: "The conversations we are having are far more valuable by being focused and constructive." Although he acknowledges the discomfort he feels with some of the personal elements of the work, he also recognizes their necessity. In addition, he has witnessed how using the strategies, such as 'Polarity Mapping,' "de-personalized potentially very contentious conversations so that they become constructive."

According to Leah Taylor, Professional Learning Community Consultant, "Simply telling educators to collaborate and change is not enough; we need to help them learn how. Adaptive Schools is the most accessible way to facilitate that learning. When we can dialogue, inquire and collaborate, then we really *will* transform education for our learners."

In closing, as we do the important work of transforming education in British Columbia and considering how to implement our redesigned curriculum, while being faced with cultures in various stages of readiness, we would be wise to use the Adaptive Schools approach. It will put us on the definite road to successful educational change through incorporating the skills embedded within the norms of collaboration; balancing advocacy and inquiry; effectively using strategies and processes to engage in dialogue and discussion; and establishing clear meeting standards. Our learners of today depend on it. 

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