Assessment within ILP: A journey of collaborative inquiry

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Abstract

Innovative Learning Pedagogies (ILPs) have given rise to much focus on the pedagogical changes required to ensure students work collaboratively, apply knowledge, create outcomes and communicate these outcomes effectively. One key element that has had much less focus is how students are assessed when working in an Innovative Learning Environment (ILE) and how this assessment information might be communicated to all stakeholders. As a school, we commenced our collaborative inquiry using action research-based Professional Learning to enable us to assess and track students who might not be in our assigned class and reflect upon whether traditional written reports to parents fitted the new pedagogies.

Key findings from collaboration with teachers, students and parents demonstrated the desire for a system of assessment that was online and allowed:

- *Higher levels of student voice and agency.*
- *On-going review so that the most current information about achievement and goals was available.*
- *Parents to share in the richness of their child's learning journey.*
- *A holistic profile of the students, rather than one which purely focussed on academic achievements.*

We believe that the outcomes of this assessment inquiry will have a significant impact on all teaching and learning in our ILEs.

Keywords: *Collaborative inquiry; assessment and reporting; innovative learning pedagogies; distributive leadership; developmental action-research*

Context

This leadership story is set in Farm Cove Intermediate which caters for 11 to 13 year olds (Years 7 and 8). Farm Cove Intermediate is a decile 8 school situated in the coastal suburbs of east Auckland. The school was built in the 1980s as a variable space environment which was very similar to open plan. The open buildings had never been separated into individual classrooms. In 2012 there were plans to spend considerable funding on renovations. The goal was to modernise and create the flexibility to both close down and open up learning spaces using large glass sliders. The Board of Trustees was very willing to fund 50% of the upgrade project. However, before going ahead with this project they sought assurance that teachers would work towards maximising the potential of these learning spaces. The majority of teachers were very keen to explore the Innovative Learning Pedagogies (ILPs). However, 'letting go' their class to build student choice, voice and agency and working across the four- teacher space created concerns over how the students might be assessed and how student achievement might be recorded and shared with stakeholders. While it was apparent the ILP approach to teaching required an ILP approach to assessment, how this might look was not initially clear.

Our traditional reporting to parents package was becoming a barrier to teachers feeling free to implement many of the ILPs. Teachers needed knowledge to support student three-way conferences and to enable them to write individual student reports. However, the question which our teachers were asking was: how can we feel free to use ILPs when we need to have this in-depth knowledge of each student?

Unpacking what ILP assessment could look like in our school has led the school on a three-year journey of collaborative inquiry based on developmental action-research. The action-research model which we employed has strong similarities to the Cardno (2003) model which has the three phases of reconnaissance, intervention

and evaluation. The mini cycles described by Cardno which spiral off the main focus have definitely been part of our experience. Teachers have been required to be flexible as we have 'spun-off': to write curriculum rubrics; create online systems; work with recently appointed teachers; and consider research evidence gained from Board of Trustees meetings, teacher feedback, parents and student focus groups.

As Cardno (2012) suggests, "A fundamental aspect in developing and sustaining a culture of collaboration is a need to *manage* collaborative management" (p. 125). Collaboration includes: teamwork with staff having clear knowledge of the goals; well defined roles and responsibilities; sound leadership and direction; an emphasis on communication skills and professional development as a high priority (Cardno, 2012). As we have progressed with this inquiry we have found sustaining a culture of collaboration within the context of this assessment change challenging. On-going clarification of the goals, maintaining clear communication within the specific teams and across the whole staff team while defining and re-defining roles and responsibilities has proven to be complex and at times almost overwhelming.

Teachers at Farm Cove Intermediate would also see that Fullan's (2015) ideas on leadership in a digital age include a number of aspects which we have considered as we have progressed our inquiry. Fullan suggests that trying things and making meaning, listening and asking questions, co-learning, non-judgmentalism and learning partnerships between teachers and students are some of the leadership characteristics emerging from on-going research. You will see links to these findings as our three year journey is unpacked.

The following leadership story is based on the experiences of two senior leaders in Farm Cove Intermediate. In Year 1 the inquiry was led by one senior teacher whilst Year 2 was led by the second. In this third year they are co-leading. As our two senior leaders share their experiences it becomes apparent that it is necessary to take risks and have a culture of trust between students, teachers and communities. The importance of leaders being fluid and flexible as organisational capacity is built by providing mentoring to support all leaders and fostering a culture of collaborative inquiry into the impact of teacher pedagogy on students is also highlighted (Smardon & Charteris, 2016).

Year 1: Formulating ideas around assessment and ILPs - Leader 1
In 2015 my position as a senior teacher within Farm Cove Intermediate was already well-established; I had been undertaking the role in one of our areas of four digital classrooms for four years and we were the first set of classrooms to be fully renovated into an Innovative Learning Environment (ILE), meaning that I was also at the forefront of adopting and modelling the new pedagogies that accompanied this change in classroom environment. I was also looking towards the next steps in leadership and the Principal asked me to lead the assessment review as she understood that collaborative inquiries and reviews promote "a democratic approach to shared leadership and joint responsibility (distributive leadership) for student learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 4). This approach allowed me to lead the review with minimal or no input from the senior leadership team, a step which relied on high levels of relational trust between teachers, and between teachers and the management (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This 'hands-off' approach not only allowed us to set ourselves a challenging goal, it allowed staff a 'safe' environment where they could lead groups, critique ideas, make suggestions,ask questions and support others through the process of moving towards a system of assessment that not only fitted with ILPs but also would raise student outcomes (Hattie, 2009).

Reporting requirements
The first step of the action research was to ensure that, before making any changes to assessment and reporting, staff were aware of the legislative requirements in the National Educational Guidelines (NAGs):

- NAG 1B: through a range of assessment practices, gather information that is sufficiently comprehensive to enable the progress and achievement of students to be evaluated

- NAG 2A: report to students and their parents on the student's progress and achievement in relation to Ngā Whanaketanga Rumaki Māori and/or National Standards. Reporting to parents in plain language in writing must occur at least twice a year (Ministry of Education, 2015).

These requirements were made clear to staff by the senior leadership team at a staff meeting at the start of Term Three. This was the only whole staff meeting relating to this inquiry, which the Principal and the Deputy Principal attended during the first year of the review. This allowed staff freedom to design an assessment model that suited them. It was made very clear that teachers still had to be accountable and be able to discuss student achievement and progress, regardless of the pedagogies being used in the classroom.

Consultation process

Consultations with all stakeholders was going to be key to the success of this review process. The first of these was with the staff and it was felt to be important that teams within the school collaborated and collated their ideas, rather than collecting individual responses, as this would promote a deeper level of reflection upon current practices that already supported ILPs as well as sharing ideas about what new practices would support them. Teams were asked to comment on the following areas for assessment, reporting and parent interviews:

1. What practices do we already use that *work well* within the ILP model of teaching and learning?

2. What practices do we use that *do not work well, or are more difficult,* within the ILP model of teaching and learning?

3. In your *ideal* world what would the processes look like?

Key findings

Table 1: Key findings

Common factors	Ideas to consider but not necessarily common
Student driven and student friendly whilst using consistent language throughout the school	Closely linked to parent interviews which could be driven by parent, teacher or student need.
Ongoing for regular access to keep assessment current.	How can we safeguard from students changing the rubric results without teachers knowing?
Should form part of our teaching and not be an extra task.	Linked to National Standards including exemplars to guide students and parents
Should include current achievements and next steps for learning	Nonlinear rubrics of some kind that do not drive the teaching.
Holistic approach - we like that our reports state student involvement, effort, refer to the Key Competencies and have a general comment about how the child socialises etc.	

The findings (Table 1) were shared at a second staff consultation to ensure that all viewpoints had been included, which led to discussions on how this change process would result in the need for more use of ILPs and flexibility. Some staff were feeling daunted at the prospect of having to re-evaluate their entire way of teaching. Whilst it is

known that effective leaders need to recognise that changes can initiate these feelings in staff members and that they need to pay particular attention to staff concerns and find ways of supporting them through implementing new approaches (Ministry of Education, 2008), we now understand that our distributed leadership model could have been more effective as there were repercussions in the second year.

The next consultation was then with parents, putting together our collated ideas into a 'parent-speak' document followed by a survey to gauge parent response. The responses were mixed, with some parents being very supportive of being able to see their child's progress regularly, and others having tried something at another school and finding it unsatisfactory. Other comments highlighted the need for the holistic report and still having something written for the end of the school year. It was evident that further parent consultation would be needed.

End of year 1

At this point it was Term Four and I realised that our goal of having no more written reports after the end of 2015 was unrealistic and that this review was a more challenging and longer term process than we could have envisaged; it was also time for another leader within the school to continue the collaborative inquiry.

Year 2: Ideas into action: Building a new assessment and reporting system - Leader 2

In the second year, the task of the assessment group was to take the ideas generated by the staff and turn them into a working assessment and reporting system. This determined our school goal for the year which was:

> *to establish assessment practices and systems that support collaborative teaching and learning where the students have greater agency, choice, voice and engagement and that teachers feel greater confidence and freedom in working collaboratively.*

This goal drove our direction and decisions throughout the second year.

The team: Redefining roles and responsibilities

It was important that the collaborative teacher-driven process that had already been established was continued in the second year. The staff had been given autonomy in the direction taken and the choices made because the assessment had to fit the reality of working in an innovative learning environment. What this required was a willingness to put aside traditional practice and look at assessment with fresh eyes. For this reason, the key group investigating, developing and implementing changes were classroom teachers.

The deliberate decision was made to have two key groups, each with a different function. Learning from Year 1, the leadership group had the role of coordinating the process, providing support and guidance when required (Smardon & Charteris, 2016; Hattie, 2009). The teacher group was given the authority to lead the change and had the task of investigation, development and implementation. The group members were purposely selected to represent the wider staff and for the particular skills they brought to the group.

The journey: Developing a model

We knew that the new system had to:

- support collaborative teaching and learning

- be simple to use yet produce detailed results

- meet the different requirements of the stake-holders – students, teachers, school leaders, Board of Trustees and the Ministry of Education.

Re-imagining how we went about assessment required us to put aside our beliefs and what we had traditionally done, reconsider our teaching practice and look for other models of assessment and reporting. As part of our investigation, we were fortunate to have the opportunity to visit two other schools.

Student and parent voice was an important part of the process (Fullan, 2015). A student focus group was formed from a range of students from across the school. These students met with the Principal to provide insight and feedback to the assessment group. A parent meeting was held to outline the new assessment and reporting system and to obtain initial responses and feedback.

Our model of assessment and reporting was designed to include following key elements which are described below:

- Learning conversations
- Collaborative digital records of learning
- Student evidence sites
- Rubrics
- Summary statements giving National Standards
- Student-led conferences
- Official school-wide summative data

Learning conversations form a key part of our system of assessment and reporting. This includes everyone: students, teachers, parents. Discussion, dialogue, coaching and goal setting are fundamental to student learning at our school.

Collaborative digital records of learning are kept by staff and students. This includes student reflection on their work, with students collecting evidence of their learning which are shared and available in digital format. Parents have ongoing access to this evidence throughout the year and are encouraged to engage in the assessment process.

School rubrics have been developed for Maths, Literacy and Inquiry. Teaching teams are able to create their own more specific rubrics for particular learning. The rubrics are shared with parents on the students' evidence of learning sites.

Simple summary statements of learning replace the traditional style of written reports. These are issued twice a year to parents, containing National Standards results, the student's participation and involvement record and a general comment about the student.

Student-led conferences continue at set times during the year, and these may use different formats including triadic meetings with parent, teacher and student; group conferences; and exhibitions of student learning.

Key leadership learnings
Change can be confronting
Teachers were asked to change their assessment practice which meant changes to their teaching practice. This challenged belief about what good teaching practice looks like.

Collaboration can mean things work on a different timeframe than expected
Effective collaboration requires resourcing in terms of timetabling release and funding (Cardno, 2012). It can be difficult to accurately allocate how much time is needed for discussion and feedback, and the trialling and developing of ideas.

Year 3: Initiating and embedding actions - Leaders 1 and 2
Involvement in a local schools' network has provided additional support as we have undertaken this inquiry project. Professional learning and discussions in both breakfast and after school meetings has allowed us to understand change processes, further develop our strategic thinking and grow our understanding and skills relating to

collaborative inquiry. Continued involvement in this group will allow us to examine additional literature and extend our collaborative networks so we deepen our understandings and enhance our effectiveness as leaders in an age where ILEs and ILPs are becoming the norm.

While we have not yet fully achieved our goal, teacher and student trials show that implementing our planned assessment strategies will allow us the freedom to explore exciting ILP learning opportunities which we believe will have an extremely positive effect on student learning (Hattie, 2009). This year, in order to develop our learning conversations, coaching will be part of our professional learning. We are looking forward to further developing our coaching skills so teachers coach teachers, teachers coach students and students coach each other. This will lead us into another mini-cycle (Cardno, 2003) and involve us in further collaborative inquiry. We find Donohoo and Velasco (2016) findings very encouraging as they believe that "when teachers are learning, students' learning experiences are enhanced" (2016, p. 3).'

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