

Finding our Roots in the Leaves: An Ecology of Change in Leading Learning that Matters

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Preschoolers Amy, Cathy, Eugene, Rob, and Reena dash back to their teacher, Lynette George, eager to show her the leaves they had picked from the Blackwood trees.

Reena: Is this the leaf? This can make soap?

Lynette: Let's test it, shall we? [She wets her hands, takes some of the leaves and crushes them between her hands.] First, we crunch the leaves with water in our hands, and then we rub it very hard and fast with our hands. [The students begin to imitate her actions.]

Eugene: I'm getting bubbles! Look! I made bubbles!

Rob: Me too! It's really soap!

Lynette: Smells nice, doesn't it?

Cathy: It does! My hands feel all clean and nice now!

Amy: My leaves are not making any soap!

Lynette: Try the other leaves. Do they work?

Amy: No. Where can we find those leaves? [She points to the leaves that the other students are using.] I want to get more of those.

Lynette: Not all the leaves will work. You have to test them. [She puts some fresh leaves in Amy's hands.] You need more water. We need to be persistent, don't we? It's hard, isn't it? We've got to practice!

Eugene: I think I can wash myself every day with these leaves!

Cathy: Yes! But you need many, many more leaves. Let's pick more!

Lynette: Remember: we can only take these ones off the trees today because we are making soap. You can't pick them all the time. We only pick what we need, or we won't have more to use next time.

Reena: What else can we do with the leaves?

Lynette: Well, the Wurundjeri people soak them in water and use the water for a lot of things, like reducing headaches and sore eyes, and treating insect bites and stings. Many other plants and trees are used for different things. So, you see, the land we live on takes care of us in many ways.

Rob: Is that why we have to take care of the land too?

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How can school leaders transform and energize the learning that students experience in the classroom? What becomes possible when relevant and compelling learning lies at the heart of school decisions? This chapter offers a window into what a strong focus on the learning that matters for the lives that learners will live and can look like through the example of Beaconhills College¹. It proposes that leading learning that matters for our contemporary world involves tapping a complex ecology of influences and adopting a more distributed notion of leadership. Doing so engages the school community in creating a shared vision, setting directions, developing capacity, and sustaining progress.

Developments in the last century – the rise of the global economy, increasing uncertainty created by sociotechnical developments, unprecedented population mobility reshaping our world, and more – have challenged educators to shift how they think about what matters most to learn. Traditional systems of learning around the world are being substantially challenged and reshaped, and not only how we teach but *what* we teach has become a critical front of exploration for schools.

Through the work that we have been doing in the state of Victoria, Australia, we have found that school leaders who seek to prepare learners for today's dynamic and complex society focus on the learning that matters (*what is worth learning*): they open up possibilities beyond more traditional conversations about methods of teaching and reconsider evaluation. These leaders recognize that while instruction and assessment are important, paying attention only to the 'how' of teaching and evaluation can often narrow a school's focus, leading to incremental solutions that do not address deeper problems of education. Schools may get better at delivery and assessment while not facing the more fundamental challenge of remaining relevant to their learners and their communities in a swiftly changing world.

Defining the learning that matters for Beaconhills College began in 2012, when college headmaster, Tony Sheumack, joined a cohort of eleven school principals on a programme called *Leading Learning that Matters* (LLtM). LLtM is a collaboration between Project Zero of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, an educational research and development group; and Independent Schools Victoria, a coalition of independent schools in Victoria, Australia. LLtM is a loosely structured process for individual schools and small coalitions of schools. It invites participating school leaders and their staff and community to engage in a reflective process of rethinking some aspects of what's taught and how it's taught. It encourages them to construct a vision and to make that vision a daily reality in courses and classrooms.

The LLtM programme is now in its second cycle with a new group of school leaders. While we could draw worthwhile stories from most of the settings that both cohorts of school leaders work in, and thank them heartily for their participation and good work, for the sake of sharing a full picture, we have chosen to focus on one school here.

Learning that Matters at Beaconhills College

At Beaconhills College, preschoolers like Amy, Cathy, Eugene, Rob, and Reena experience the Aboriginal connection with the land on a regular basis. They explore the bushland area in Beaconhills College's Pakenham Campus, and come to understand how the local indigenous people have sustainably used natural resources for generations to live a healthy life.

Year 5 students at the College embark on interdisciplinary investigations focused on the local community and the land that they live on, and what it means for the College to be located on the land of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung, traditional custodians of the land. They learn what "landownership" and "custodianship" mean, and develop a sense of who they are vis-à-vis the land.

Instead of "camps", Year 9 and 10 students embark on programs including trips to the Northern Territory where they practice Aboriginal traditions of deep reflection, shared learning, and storytelling with the local communities. They collaborate with students from the local schools, meet local indigenous leaders, and learn age-old methods of living and working.

On the College grounds, a dedicated outdoor space combines a medieval Christian maze with a circle of Aboriginal thinking stones made from local mudstone. Students go there to think, meditate, reflect and pray. The setting also encourages shared learning, reflection and storytelling – important aspects of Aboriginal tradition.

Such experiences are part of Beaconhills College's Indigenous cultural learning programme, designed to support students towards a multi-perspectival understanding of Australia's history. The programme recognizes the First People's roles, cultures, and contributions to the country, and constitutes an integral part of the College's LLtM initiative.

The *learning that matters* at Beaconhills College is described in Six Key Pillars – *learning*, the *environment*, *our world and other cultures*, *citizenship and service*, *wellbeing*, and *values and character* – at the heart of the College's vision and mission. They define the elements the College believes are necessary to support the holistic education of students. The Beaconhills curriculum aligns with the Six Key Pillars for a more holistic curriculum that include programs more traditionally considered "extra-curricular". Traditional learning areas at Beaconhills College are inflected via the *learning that matters* lens as teachers identify relevant and meaningful learning outcomes for the students.

When teacher Lynette George first proposed to the leadership team that an authentic understanding of Indigenous culture must be anchored in a collaborative, respectful relationship with the local Indigenous communities, she had no idea that it would become a full-scale curricular programme in the College, touching the lives of all students and staff. According to Tony, Lynette's proposal came at an opportune time for the College:

We tried many different programmes for about fifteen years, with no success at all, because there was no shared need with the Indigenous community. The reality is that we cannot impose ourselves on them; it needs to resonate with the community. We need to develop a shared understanding that is built on deep respect and mutual trust.

Today, the College runs regular events that weave Indigenous learning into the fabric of school life: annual Reconciliation events for all levels to celebrate and recognize Indigenous culture; workshops led by the head elder of the Wurundjeri people on Aboriginal history and traditions; classroom lessons that nurture a broader understanding of what being "Australian" means. Non-teaching staff are also heavily involved, for

instance, helping to conceptualize and build the reflection circle. The College's overseas programmes have broadened and deepened to offer culturally different experiences for students and staff to "not just 'see' a place... but to be a part of it, to serve and be out of one's comfort zone, to live the life of the community."

Four Key Leadership Practices

In general, LLtM does not offer "right answers" to what learning matters. Instead, it invites schools to engage questions of *what learning matters* for their context, *for whom and why*, using key questions and other tools. Deliberations on the questions invariably involve problem finding, experimentation, and developing new practices. More importantly, the enterprise is not a solitary one; often, it is best embarked in collaboration with the school community, making the LLtM initiative unique and responsive to the school's needs and structure. Over several years of documenting school leaders' LLtM initiatives, we have noted four essential leadership practices: *creating shared vision*, *developing collaborative structures*, *supporting individual development*, and *sustaining progress*. In what follows, we explain each practice, illustrating it with examples from Beaconhills College.

Creating Shared Vision

School leaders are crucial change agents for their schools when leading LLtM initiatives. Effective leaders involve stakeholders in crafting and shaping a compelling and shared vision of the learning that matters. By creating spaces for dialogue across the community, they allow answers to emerge over time.

At Beaconhills College, the leadership team used *learning that matters* as a critical lens by which to arrive at what eventually became the College's Six Key Pillars of learning and holistic education. The leadership team created opportunities for staff to reflect on what learning matters using prompts such as: *Who are we as "Beaconhills", and what do we stand for? What's our mission?* Inviting the staff to collaboratively articulate a vision of the learning that matters for the College built momentum for the LLtM initiative, resulting in school-wide support for it because everyone felt ownership of it.

The leadership team also invited staff to rethink the work that they had been doing through the lens of *learning that matters*, prompting curricular review and innovation. Stephen McGinley, Head of Education, describes how *learning that matters* has provided a way for the College to talk about what matters to learn and why, effectively connecting curricular conversations to the College's strategic direction, identity and philosophy.

More importantly, working towards a shared vision has pushed the staff to challenge the status quo and assumptions about what learning really matters. Yvonne Ashmore, Head of Wellbeing, sees the focus on the *learning that matters* as "an invitation to really interrogate what programmes like Wellbeing means from the perspective of Beaconhills. *Learning that matters* is a broad aspirational idea that allows us to define what it means for us."

A shared vision, however, becomes a stumbling block if the community cannot find their way into it, or find themselves in it. Early on, Tony realized that everyone had their own idea of what "holistic learning" meant:

We had to break down the ideas behind 'holistic learning,' to distill what the important aspects are into the Six Key Pillars, and really make sure that we hit those in everything we do. The language of the Pillars resonates because it is accessible, and people can easily

unpack it... yet it is still open to interpretation, so our staff can own it and communicate it in their own words.

Developing Collaborative Structures

Another key LLtM practice involves putting in place structures that support interdependent learning and experimentation among the staff. These structures create spaces for staff to think together, and develop processes for sharing ideas, encouraging risk taking, learning from mistakes, and giving feedback. Such structures range from redesigning meetings, to including stakeholders' voices in decision making, to using physical spaces to invite and support collaboration.

A key move that Tony made when Lynette proposed her idea for Indigenous cultural learning was to connect her to Sam Maddock, Head of Beacon Explorers. He encouraged them to rethink and, if necessary, retool the existing Outdoor Education programme. In the course of working together, Lynette's perspective on Indigenous cultural learning as an Indigenous person encouraged Sam to deeply reflect on what about outdoor experiences matter:

I've visited many national parks in Australia, and I've always had this almost spiritual feeling that there's something about this land I'm standing on that I don't know about, and I want to understand who was here before me and why it was important for them. Working with Lynette really pushed me to think about how outdoor experiences should really get the students to ask themselves: *what is this environment I'm in, and why is it important to me and also to my community?* This gets them to bring in the history and culture, and taking these different perspectives builds deeper thinking.

Their collaboration resulted in the embedding of Outdoor Education within the school curriculum, signaling unequivocally that outdoor experiences are as important as classroom learning. The Outdoor Education programme has also changed in important ways: for instance, instead of local and overseas trips to learn *about* other communities, such trips now require students to enter into and *participate* in the life and rhythm of the communities. Students on these trips reflect on their responsibility to their fellow human beings, and have begun to raise important questions about their world:

They start asking questions like: *Who is an Aboriginal person and how do you know?* They see now that it's not a color distinction, that Aboriginal people are not all a certain color. And neither do you have to live in the Northern Territory to be Aboriginal. It's so important that they are now asking these difficult questions and grappling with them. (Sam)

Lynette and Sam regularly tested their ideas for the Outdoor Education programme with the staff, inviting their feedback and suggestions. They also involved more staff in the programme. As the staff began to see the results of Lynette's and Sam's experiments with the programme, they became bolder about asking questions hitherto deemed risky. Sam describes how teachers now feel confident sharing their vulnerabilities with him: *What is that story we want to tell about the place we are taking the students to? How do I teach it, what do I say?* The teachers have grown more sensitive to the traditions of the Indigenous communities, and deeply cognizant and respectful of the protocols to telling Aboriginal stories.

They now see and really respect that there are protocols in the Aboriginal oral tradition about who can tell the story, and why... They are more aware of how the Aboriginal stories are an important way of passing on to the next generation the accumulated knowledge, spirituality, and wisdom of the community. They are asking: *Is it my story to tell? If not,*

who can help me tell the story? So, we began collaborating with the Indigenous communities to create a programme that honors the Indigenous voice and perspective. (Sam)

Tony believes that the current College-wide impetus towards deeper understanding of and greater engagement with local Indigenous and global communities is the result of the right people in the right places at the right time:

It's about having good people who want to do good things, and giving them enough latitude so that they can explore and experiment and really do good things... It has to be strategic; we put people to lead each of the Six Key Pillars across the College, and our staff know who is doing what. There's no mystery; everyone knows who to go to with an idea for the learning that matters.

Supporting Individual Development

Leading an initiative, however compelling, is challenging unless underpinning the endeavor is the human capacity for change. School leaders engaged in LLtM successfully create stimulating conditions for staff to develop capacities for learning and change by tapping into their intrinsic motivation and beliefs to support the change, and supporting agency, experimentation and risk-taking.

Lynette's experience is a case in point. Tony recognized early on that her passion for and commitment to her proposal made her an ideal champion for the Indigenous cultural learning programme across the College's two campuses:

We wanted a programme that involved the local Indigenous community in an authentic way, but we didn't have a champion. So, whatever we had ended up very tokenistic. To complicate things, any programme had to be implemented across our two campuses in synergistic ways. With Lynette, the programme really took off. She really championed the programme, connecting to people, and working across the campuses on the programme.

Lynette credits the support from Tony and his leadership team for her success in implementing and growing the programme. She remembers how, right from the outset, they had allowed her to make decisions and run with her ideas, and to organize things and "just have a go." She smiles as she remembers how she was told: "If it worked, that's good. If it didn't, let's think about what we could do better next time." One of her fondest memories is the first assembly she organized for Year 4-12 students and staff:

We had 900 children in the auditorium, several speakers, and the event went on for two hours. Allowing me to run that meant stopping the whole school's usual routine. It was tough for some teachers to give up their teaching time for it, and it wasn't even during the regular assembly time! It was so encouraging that the school would allow that!

Ultimately, it was the leadership's trust in her proposal and her capacity to lead it that gave Lynette the confidence to forge ahead on what was previously uncharted territory for her:

Just allowing me some of my dreams and aspirations, to go forward, and to educate other people on a topic they didn't know much about – that's just been huge for me... I was just trusted to do a good job, trusted to get the right people in to talk to the children, to decide how long it was going to be. To be able to have that was very humbling. I was so proud of myself!

Sam similarly attributed his drive to stretch himself to explore new ideas to Tony's trust in his capacity to lead change:

Just being recognized that you are the expert in your field, so off you go; that same trust, autonomy and opportunity that we are trying to give our students, that's what we've been given as leaders, and we all thrive on that! To allow our passion and trust our expertise and give us that opportunity, that's absolutely been the biggest part of it for me.

Sustaining Progress

A critical leadership practice in shepherding an LLtM initiative is embedding processes to sustain the initiative in the everyday work of the school. Often, as an initiative rolls along, and the general feeling is that nothing seems untoward, little thought goes to institutionalizing it, making the initiative fragile. Sustaining an LLtM initiative involves allocating time and resources to support staff; protecting staff from distractions; defending the initiative against skeptics; and embedding the initiative in school policies and systems.

At Beaconhills College, a priority is maintaining focus on the LLtM initiative among staff and in curricular experiences. The leadership team recognizes that even good initiatives are susceptible to distraction and sprawl when a new trend surfaces. Stephen emphasizes that:

Any idea or proposal is examined through the lens of *learning that matters*. That lens has really helped us focus our efforts and not get distracted by the latest buzzwords or frameworks. We don't use other language so that what we are doing is consistent, and there's no encroaching on our thinking.

Focusing on *learning that matters* also achieves long-term stability through strategically changing the College's leadership structures (e.g. leadership positions created to lead each of the Six Key Pillars across the two campuses), and its strategic plans (e.g. articulating a shared vision for the learning that matters and making it accessible through the Six Key Pillars; developing a map of where and when innovations would be implemented). Structurally, the leadership team and champions of various initiatives lead cross-campus groups, and are empowered to experiment with and implement their ideas. Tony explains that the crux was supporting the good things already going on in the school, and consolidating them under the LLtM banner, so that good work was clearly valued.

Tony and his team were also wary of pushing too much change or pushing change at an untenable pace. As staff became energized by the initiative, many ideas for innovations were floated, especially during the planning stage. Those ideas were put through a consultancy process with teams of staff members, who discussed them using the question, "*Where does that fit with the learning that matters?*" Ideas were tweaked and revised until they turn into well-thought-out proposals. Tony also posed an enabling constraint on the ideas proposed: *All ideas must be implemented with existing resources, so what do we lose to get this new thing?*

Taking the temperature of the staff's capacity for change was critical. Tony advised that "a little bit of success, when it actually sticks, allows you to do a little bit more. Sometimes you have to go slowly because it's not resonating, but at all times, never lose sight of where you are going."

The LLtM initiative has also been institutionalized into the College's planning and hiring systems. Year 4 teacher Sue Collins described the *learning that matters* as a mindset in the College, "It's like a compass for

us now; you see it in everything that we do in the classroom, and outside the classroom.” Interviews for staff positions require applicants to articulate what the learning that matters for them is, and the College hires those whose aspirations and commitments align with the school’s vision.

Looking Inward to Look Outward

Behind each LLtM initiative lies an amazing amount of work done collaboratively by the staff in a singular effort towards a collective vision. Participating schools have not taken the same paths on their LLtM journey. Instead, each constructs a vision of the *learning that matters* that reflects their history, ongoing commitments, and sense of the world for which they are preparing students. When the school community finds the vision compelling, they incorporate it into the very systems on which the school operates and thrives. At Beaconhills College, the LLtM initiative might have started out as the headmaster’s project, but it’s now anything but that:

Not many people were energized by it initially, especially when it involved a lot of extra work. What’s worse, it’s seen as the headmaster’s project being pushed onto the school... But it wasn’t going away: we kept going, institutionalizing it in all our systems, finding champions and supporting their work, finding a consistent way to talk about it. After three years, we had embedded it in the culture, the ethos, the identity of Beaconhills. Any new initiative now has to be incorporated into the learning that matters. It not only drove change, it legitimized it. The first couple of years, the initiative could have died very quickly. But now, it’ll be struggling to disappear because it’s no longer a project done at ISV and Harvard; it’s now just what Beaconhills is and does.

¹ Beaconhills College, an independent, open-entry, co-educational Christian school with two campuses in Berwick and Pakenham, was established in 1982 in Melbourne’s south-eastern suburbs. The school defines itself through its sense of community, diverse and innovative curriculum, global outlook and emphasis on caring for others both locally and abroad.