



SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORY JUDY PETERS

The change I am describing is a change in my understanding of what constitutes effective professional development for educational change.

When I became involved in Learning to Learn as a university Colleague I had already been involved in several other projects aimed at teacher learning and school improvement. These projects had focussed on teachers learning and implementing change through collaborative school-based action research with the support of university colleagues playing the role of critical friends. The "new" ideas with which the teachers engaged in these projects were related to learning processes of action research and critical reflection while trying to improve their practice, or the contexts in which their practice occurred. My role was to support them to do this.

In the first months of joining Learning to Learn I had concerns about its dependence on a core learning program provided by highly paid external experts, many of whom came from the United States, the home of "snake-oil" professional development. I was concerned that it might herald a return to a model of professional development that had been found to have little impact in the 70's and 80's - that of the "one-off" session provided by an "expert" who was external to the school. Educators who attended these sessions sometimes had an entertaining time but often this did not lead to changes in their thinking or practice or, at best, they gleaned one or two neat ideas they could use in their classrooms. My concerns have gradually been alleviated over the past three years as I have come to see the Core Learning Program as an integral part of a set of conditions that appear to be causing many educators to engage in a quite radical rethink of their assumptions, beliefs and practices. The irony is that I have only been able to personally experience one of the Core Learning offerings, but I have been able to experience the enthusiasm of participants in the Learning Circles as they have revealed some of the ways that the new ideas introduced by this or that expert have interacted with their thinking, and the thinking of other attendees from their school.

The change in my perceptions of the value of the external, expert-based stimulus of the Core Learning Programs has been significant for a number of reasons. Firstly it has created a tension between my initial belief that the best professional development is school-based and driven by local needs and expertise and practitioner-based research, and my recognition that there has been a clear benefit from participants' engagement with the ideas of non local experts. Secondly, resolving this tension has meant that I have had to rethink my model of ideal professional development to allow for this phenomenon. It seems to me that what Learning to Learn has done is produce a model of professional development that combines the stimulus and challenge of the theories of outside experts with ongoing opportunities for educators to interpret and critique these ideas collaboratively in their own settings, as they try to optimise learning opportunities for themselves and their students. This is highly significant in a third way - that of the system implications of the success of this model. To be successful it has required a high level of system funding over several years, combined with the belief by project administrators that teachers' are professionals whose learning and practice will improve if they are provided with particular kinds of learning opportunities and that this will, in turn, lead to educational change in the long term. For the success of Learning to Learn to become embedded in the wider system, these conditions need to be applied to the wider teaching population.