

# Developing a culture of learning by making thinking visible

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**“For classrooms to be cultures of thinking for students, schools have to be cultures of thinking for teachers.”**  
(Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011)

## Introduction

Many organisations would say they are a learning organisation due to their focus on professional learning, collaboration and sharing of knowledge. However, many make the mistake of considering professional learning (PL) to be an innovation, a fad and possibly a ‘one off’.

Reeves (2009) suggests, that professional development should focus “on a few things: what to teach, how to teach it, how to meet the needs of individual students, and how to build internal capacity” (p. 63), rather than ‘mind-numbing’ vendor packaged workshops. A true learning organisation is more a state of being than a list of features based on how it operates. Fullan (2006) supports these ideas suggesting that the development of a learning organisation requires the ability to build capacity among its participants: leaders, teachers and community.

Our schools’ journey to becoming a learning organisation has assisted staff in dealing with the rapid changes in education through focusing on the practices of individuals in the organisation as well as on policies (Levin & Fullan, 2008). This has required a careful balancing act between accountability, education reform, government and system expectations and the realities of College daily life. Early on we came to understand this truth: that “no corporation or school can thrive in the absence of creativity, innovation and learning”, (Brown 2012, p. 187), and that in order for real growth to occur, we as leaders needed to facilitate a culture of learning

that promoted these ideas. It is also important to note at this point that the college leadership team had decided that whole-school professional learning, sustained over longer periods of time, would have the best chance of being implemented and embedded in teacher practice, and therefore would be effective for increasing student achievement.

Fullan (2006) and Fullan and Quinn (2015) also suggest that a learning organisation has to get beyond surface ideas and superficial learning to deeper authentic learning. In their most recent book Fullan and Quinn (2016, p. 79) state: “we must shift from a focus on teaching or inputs to a deeper understanding of the *process* of learning and how we can influence it.” As a learning organisation participants, leaders wanted to ensure that as they were not undermining the learning of individuals, so practices were developed that ensured thinking resulted in articulation of ideas, and ideas were followed by action. Initially, in early experience as Head of Primary learning, meetings were somewhat silent, and only a few teachers would share their thinking or ideas. An emerging purpose was to encourage all teachers to have a voice.

## The Primary Leadership Team Initiative

The Primary Leadership Team (PLT) structure was a significant support in helping us find our way through this period of our learning cycle and the development of our culture of learning. It was necessary for us to answer the question: What do our students need? However, this was not a question asked initially. It became an emerging focal question as our culture of learning developed.

Some of the key ideas learnt about developing a culture came from Jovanova-Mitkovska (2010) who suggests that it is the responsibility of all schools, educators, systems, communities and society to promote and encourage a professional learning culture, one that encourages teachers to value the

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worth of life long learning. He avoids the question, “Can we have effective schools without effective teachers?” Professional learning communities that ensure follow up and reflection are results orientated. They reinforce a focus on essential common goals or standards, and are social, which encourages the best kind of accountability—internal accountability—because such relies on a commitment from others, as well as “taking responsibility for one’s actions” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 110). But significantly it “honours and empowers teachers and their intelligence, capturing the vast reserves of expertise in any team and school” (Schmoker, 2006, p. 114). This suggests that a new professional ‘trajectory’ starts with the recognition that we must identify and cultivate the talent that already resides within our schools.

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### Programs accessed and developing the culture

Early in our school journey leaders applied to participate through Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) in the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP), and continued to do so, until this program was discontinued by the Federal government. The first program undertaken was the ‘Developing a Culture of Learning’ project. As part of the project Ron Richhart from The Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Project Zero, along with Anna Bennett and Aine Maher from ISV, outlined to leaders the necessity of addressing 8 Cultural Forces (Richhart, 2002) when developing a professional learning culture. They also led learning about and understanding of both the use and value of Project Zero thinking protocols to develop students’ thinking and enhance their learning.

Consequently, as part of the sustained professional learning strategies, leaders discussed how these 8 Cultural factors and Project Zero protocols could be utilised with teachers, not only to develop collaboration and professional conversation around teaching and learning, but also as a modelling of some effective practices teachers could use in their classrooms. As Helen Timperley (2015, p. 6) describes “One way to think about this idea is for leaders to consider teachers as their ‘class’ of professionals, in the same way that teachers have classes of student learners.”

The use of protocols such as Microlab, See, Think Wonder, and Connect, Extend, Challenge were therefore used to engage leaders and teachers in conversations around professional readings, videos and other stimuli. Initially it was difficult and the conversations didn’t flow as smoothly as expected. Reeves (2009, p. 48) states that if “you are committed to effective change, then persistence through the initial challenges to achieve the essential short-term wins will be necessary, even when that

persistence is unpopular.” This was found to be true and over time (years to be honest), through selecting engaging stimuli that would encourage teachers’ thinking and conversations, these protocols started to emerge, becoming observed in teachers’ classroom practice and soon useful as part of developing students as thinkers.

The culture of learning was growing and developing. Teachers’ talk about their practice and students’ learning became more natural and extended beyond formal settings. Leaders increasingly observed professional conversations occurring in informal settings such as around the staffroom table at lunchtime. What was also surprising was a comment made in conversation a few years into our journey where a teacher said, “*I try everything you model to us*”. This was a stunning outcome because the protocols were not mandated. Leadership simply wished to model some effective ways to support students to learn and think, by using them as part of teacher professional learning.

Through the use of thinking protocols during professional learning sessions the teacher group started to establish a common language and consistent professional dialogue around such key ideas as, “What makes the most improvement in teaching and learning?”, or unpacking the Australian Professional Standards. The group found, like Opfer and Pedder (2011), that teachers saw ‘whole school commitment’ and ‘social capital’ were very significant in professional learning. They began to understand that leaders saw it was important to provide time and opportunities for them to collaborate and talk about teaching and learning, and to share ideas and expertise. Teachers saw that their individual identity was being acknowledged. As stated earlier, Richhart’s (2002) 8 Cultural Forces (Time, Opportunities, Routines and Structures, Common Language, Modeling, Interactions and Relationships, Physical Environment and Expectations) that define professional learning communities and classroom environments, were central in establishing the environment and culture for teacher learning.

### Example 1

Mrs Holland’s reflections

“The first Compass Point lesson concluded our Year 2 Unit on the Past and the Present. We thought we would finish off with one lesson on thinking about the Future. This was the first time that they had used this thinking routine, so while the lesson was an introduction to Compass Points it revealed their thinking about the Future (Figure 1). Again, I used Think Pair Share to help those kids who were reticent to use the new protocol... it empowered them to share in our discussions.”

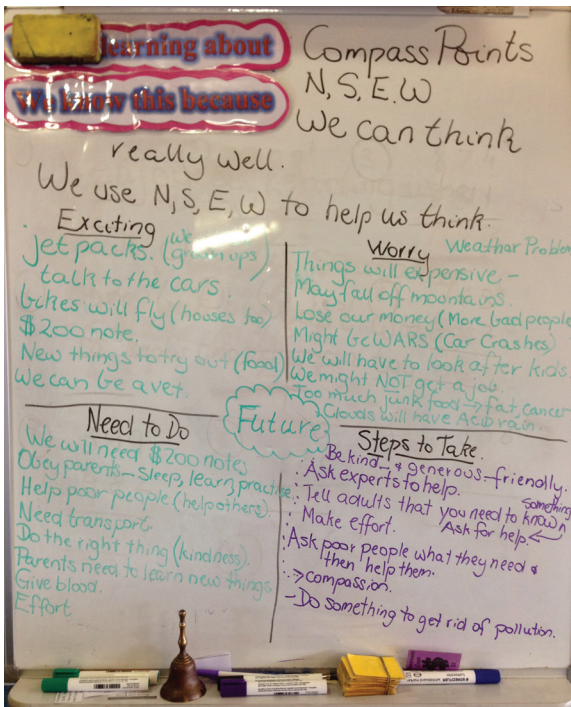


Figure 1. Using the Compass Points thinking protocol with Year 2 students

## Developing the leaders

A significant focus in developing our culture was the development of our own capacity as leaders. Hargreaves (2009, p. 180) suggests that the best leaders develop leadership capacity in themselves as well as others. Leaders have a central role in creating this culture. It is about what they do daily to encourage these behaviours and habits. Fullan (2015, p. 35) states that it is “well documented as successful in practice that principals should act as ‘lead learners’, participating with teachers in ‘using the group to change the group.’” Boud and Middleton (2003) identified this concept as leaders encouraging learning from each other at work by pursuing the rich sources of information from each other in a ‘community of practice’. Simply put, leaders have to be learning alongside their teachers modelling the importance of learning whilst building the capacity of each member of their team. Through our Primary Leadership Team learning, our teachers were engaged in rich teacher learning, which has transformed the way our students are taught and learn too.

## Key Points Learned

Key points learnt along the way about learning cultures and teachers are:

- Learning cultures take time to establish
- The 8 Cultural Forces that surround learning

- cultures must be addressed
- Protocols are important for engaging in effective conversations
- It is important that leaders are lead learners alongside their teachers
- It is important that teachers are given voice
- Teachers should be part of setting the pace for learning
- Teachers are the designers of their learning
- It is the role of leaders, as lead learners, to develop teachers’ capacity in how to identify effective ways to learn professionally

## Example 2

Teachers are brainstorming differentiation. Each has a book to guide their thinking. The protocol Connect Extend Challenge is being used to respond to their shared personal reading. A shared understanding of what differentiation ‘looks like’ and ‘sounds like’ is being formed. The PLT then used teacher learning as a type of ‘formative assessment’ practice for ‘leaders’ and to plan future differentiation PL. This strategy was learned from a recent short course on *Making Learning Visible*.



Figure 2. Teachers are brainstorming differentiation

## Recent developments

As a result of taking the time over many years to build our professional learning culture, and with the assistance of the learning received as leaders from ISV, an invitation was received in 2015 to take part in Project Zero (PZ) Connect, a pilot PL collaboration between Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) and the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. This project involved teachers and leaders having the opportunity to learn through a series of short online courses delivered by Harvard facilitators. Twenty eight of our teachers and leaders were engaged in Action Research through two of the offered courses: ‘Making Learning Visible’ and ‘Making Thinking Visible’.

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As a result of this partnership, while once a few teachers had used visible thinking protocols effectively in their classrooms, but in an adhoc manner (as a result of the PLT modelling their use, as described above), now many teachers engaged in using visible thinking protocols in their classrooms to develop deeper thinking in their students. It is exciting to note that thirty six teachers have submitted expressions of interest to participate in four 2016 ISV/Harvard short courses as part of the professional learning component of their Action Research.

### Example 3

The Leaders as part of their learning were documenting the learning of teachers. This graphic (Figure 3) documents some reflections from literacy support aides taken from their professional learning (PL). It was important for us to document the reflections in this way to affirm for our aides the value leaders place on them and their professionalism. It was also important to the leaders for our adult learners to see their learning displayed in a public space—where they could be proud of it, where it could act as a reminder to them of the strategies they could use with the students in

their care, and where passersby could view it and perhaps discuss it. The documentation was also completed as a model to our classroom teachers of what is possible for them, demonstrating the value and use of documentation in planning learning.

### Summary of changes observed

As a result of developing our professional learning community we have seen the following changes in teacher practice:

- Increase in complex questioning by teachers
- Increase in use of visible thinking protocols across the whole primary school and in a number of areas of the secondary school
- Consistent use of learning intentions and success criteria to guide and assess learning
- Collaborative team planning, with more teachers asking more inquiry questions
- Student-led learning becoming a key feature of teacher planning and practice
- Increase in formative feedback and feed forward to students
- Willingness of teachers to accept and act on PL feedback and feed forward—very open to learning

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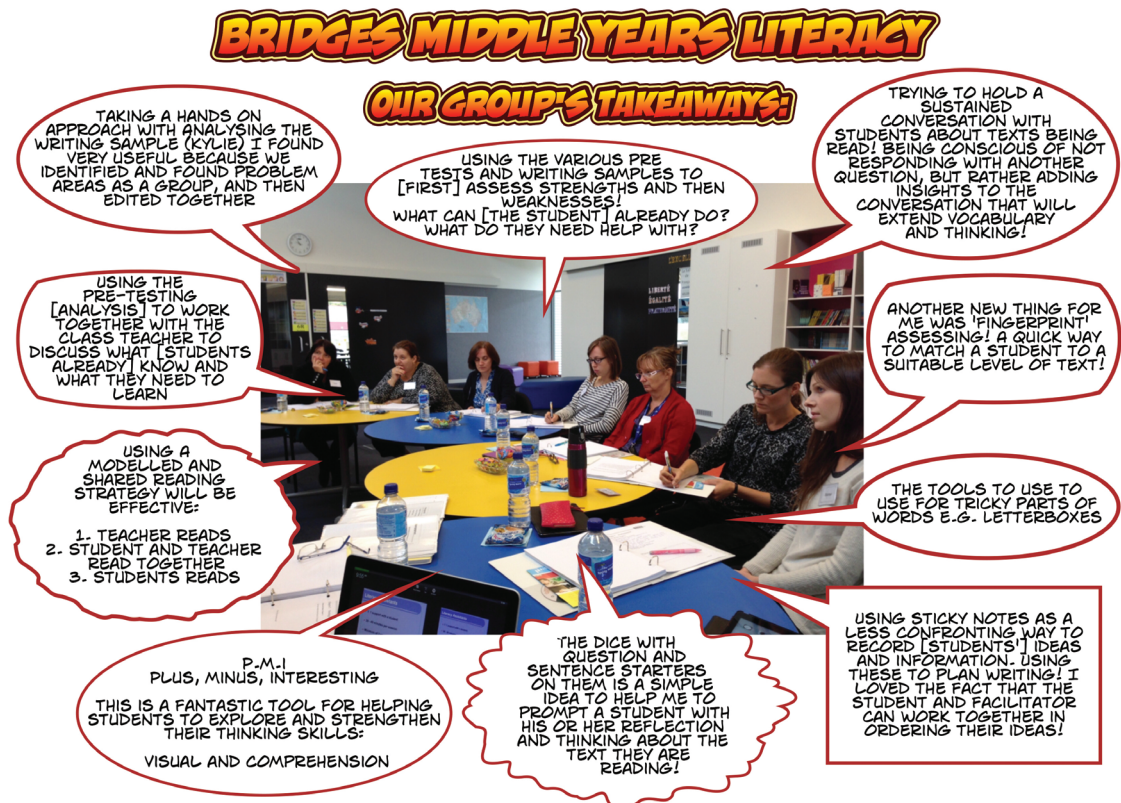


Figure 3. Reflections of some of our literacy support aides during their professional learning (PL)



Figure 4. Stimulus images for See Think Wonder in action – Year 2

- Increased passion about teaching—teachers are more aware of their own impact on learning and feel empowered
- Teachers also now seek each other’s advice and expertise
- Teachers willingly opening their classrooms to leader and peer observations

The following figures and text are some examples of the evidence of change recently shared from the Year 2 and Year 5 classes within the school. They are shared in the spirit of collaborative, reflective practice, an outcome of the PL cycles in our school.

#### Example 4

##### See Think Wonder protocols

Use of the See Think Wonder protocols in the Year 2 classroom incorporates the images in Figure 4 and the following question prompts:

##### Think:

- What do these pictures make you *think* about?
- What do you *think* these pictures are saying?
- What do you *think* is similar about these pictures?
- What do you *think* these pictures have in common?

**See:** This *thinking* is evidence based....

- What do you see that makes you *think* that?

#### Example 5

*Students bring their own assumptions to critique work. Students’ background is often overlooked when teachers plan for discussions. If teachers can bring different perspectives to what they see in a situation, students can too. Ms Angie Sharma – Year 5 Teacher.*

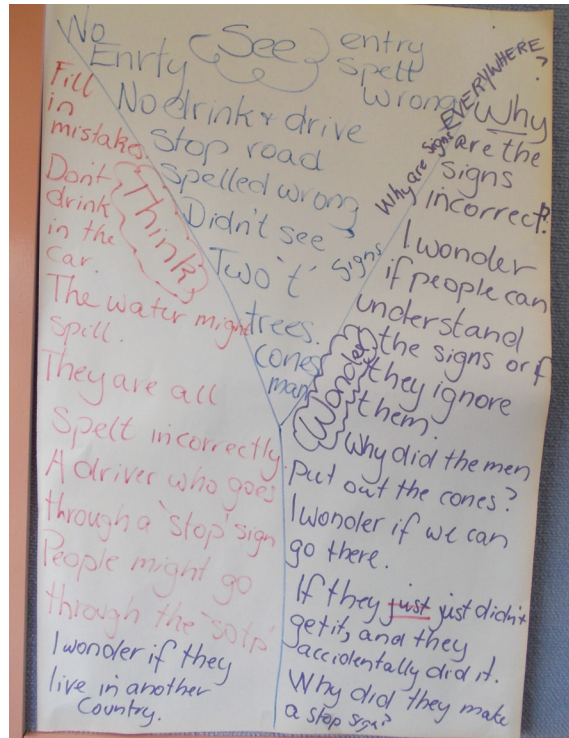


Figure 5. The students thinking made visible in Year 2

“If teachers can bring different perspectives to what they see in a situation, students can too”

Year 5 students using protocols as part of Literature Circles and to share their thinking on a school task a new product ‘Apple Watch’.

#### Conclusion

A professional learning culture allows for all people in the organisation to be afforded the opportunity to build capacity. Such a culture relies upon balancing both a collective and an individual approach to work. Our College aims to become the training ground for all of its teachers and acknowledges that learning is ongoing, ambiguous and largely determined by the culture in which it is planted; a culture that is determined by its leaders. While accountability is important, a collective aim is to avoid the distractions of governance and compliance. While these are necessary they should not dim the light on the real stars of an organisation—the student and the learning. Through the use of simple protocols that ask teachers to consider “What do you see? What does it make you think? And, What does it make you wonder?”, schools are creating a culture of leaders, teachers and students who are learning alongside each other as deep and reflective thinkers. This linked learning community is highly committed to ensuring that all students entrusted to a Christian school have the opportunity to develop and achieve to their fullest potential. **TEACH**

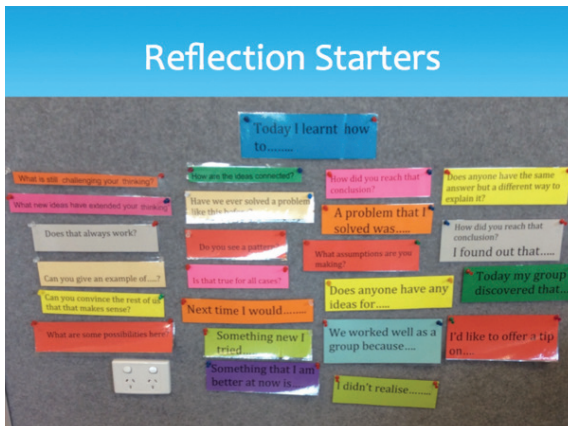


Figure 6. Reflections on Making Thinking Visible

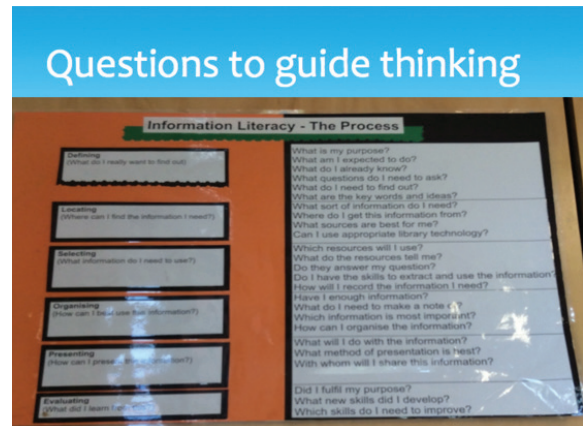


Figure 8. Literature circles and thinking protocols

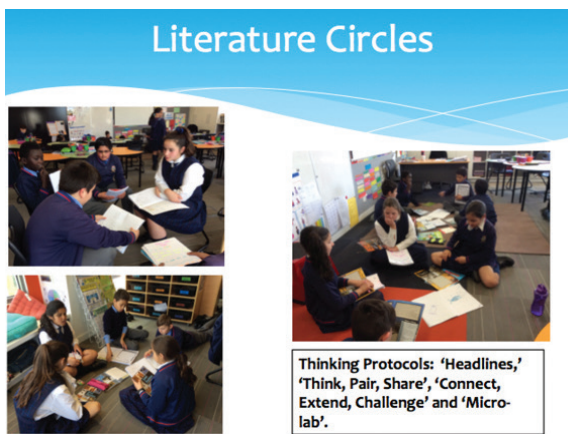


Figure 7. Literature circles and thinking protocols

“a collective aim is to avoid the distractions of governance and compliance. ...they should not dim the light on ... the student and the learning.”

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Figure 9. Reflections on a Apple Watch

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