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Learning or Performance: What Should Educational Leaders Pay Attention To?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the important question of how educational leaders think about how they spend their working time in the context of significant changes to the nature and purposes of their daily work. The report focuses on a dilemma that is confronting many educational leaders – why is it that I seem to get so little time to engage with the things that I value most? Put another way, why am I spending so much time responding to external accountability requirements and so little, in relative terms, on the learning culture of my school community? If our core business is learning, then surely the promotion of a culture of learning should be occupying most of my time. If not, why not, and what can I do about it?

To explore these questions we take on four main tasks in this paper. First, we explore the context in which measuring performance has become the main game for educational funding, and thus for educational institutions. Then, drawing on Carol Dweck's (1999) research, we set out a case for understanding *learning* and *performance* as different sorts of goals, rather than seeing them as inextricably linked to each other. Having outlined this distinction, we then ask about how both of these goals are pursued in the 'attentional economy' (Taylor, 2005) of educational leaders - that is, how such leaders divide their attention across these two sets of goals and with what effect. Finally, we present empirical data on one school principal's 'attentional economy' for comment and self-reflection.

Keywords: Attention, school leadership, risk management

1 Why performance measures now?

As part of their retreat from the funding of public education and health in general, Western governments are increasingly tying funding for schools to 'learning outcomes' as measured against government determined "standards". These standards are generally linked to government approved national priorities such as better employability skills, and improvements in literacy, numeracy and citizenship, as defined within state-sanctioned policy. According to Corson (2002), this imperative shows itself in the drive towards standardised testing regimes linked to notions of accountability that are presumed to measure improvements in learning:

[G]overnments across the world are saddling schooling systems with an extravagant array of tests and assessments, so much so that some warn against the arrival of the 'evaluative state' that will be tied in all respects to a doctrine of competition, measurable results, and efficiency. (p.7)

In broad terms, the funders of education, both government and non-government, have come to fix almost exclusively on performance data that can be standardised in order to allow for intra-state, national and international comparisons. Despite the often questionable nature of these data as a basis for evaluating and comparing educational performance, educators at all levels are under pressure to support teaching and learning strategies which maximize student results in the assessment tasks which form the basis of the league table data.

Schools and universities that have the resources and reputational clout to sit at the top of a league table can advantage students who are similarly aspirational. This means that a significant minority of institutions with the cultural and financial capital to resource their activities well are unlikely to complain about public league tables. Indeed, some educators welcome them as useful indicators of where they are and/or where they aspire to be in years to come. Others are less sanguine. David Mulcahy, for example, argues that this aspiration is not to a high standard of education but to "a high standard of standardness" (in Brenneis, Shore and Wright, 2003, p.7). Studies by Gewirtz (1999) in the United Kingdom and Lingard et al (2002) in Australia, point to a trend to value critical, autonomous and creative thinking skills only if and when they can be seen to contribute to productivity as measured by the school's aggregate examination performance. In simple terms, performance is no longer "merely an important instrument or component within the [schooling] system", but has come to "constitute the system itself" (Ranson, 2003: p.459).

Whether by choice or not, educators know that performance matters – it drives funding, and is a marker of reputation. The higher up the league table, the greater the expertise of the staff and the more likely it is therefore that the students are working optimally as learners.

2 Performance *or* learning?

Or are they? Carol Dweck's (1999) distinction between performance goals and learning goals allow us to think again about this proposition. For Dweck, an individual's performance goals are "about winning positive judgment of your competence and avoiding negative ones", while an individual's learning goals are characterised by a desire to acquire "new skills, master new tasks or understand new things" (p.15). While these two goals are "normal and universal", they are often in conflict. Dweck (1999) notes that, when there is an overemphasis on performance goals, individuals are less likely to risk moving out of their zones of competence, and more likely to blame their own innate ability if things go wrong. They are more likely to worry too much about their ability and not enough about strategy. When the pressure is on, if they can't look smart, nothing matters more than avoiding looking dumb, and this can consume a great deal of time and energy, while at the same time creating a downward spiral of self-recrimination, vulnerability and victim-hood (Dweck, pp.16-19).

In Dweck's research, performance goals and learning goals were found to be present in most young people in about a 50/50 ratio (p.16). They could however, be manipulated by an external 'other' (eg, a parent or teacher). When this occurred, it was clear that those students for whom learning goals were paramount continued to seek new strategies while those who were performance-driven were more likely to give up on the task set, blaming themselves for their inability to complete it.

While we need to be cautious about extrapolating from the 'self-theories' of the individual to the climate of a school, there is nevertheless much of what Dweck is saying that might be usefully brought to an analysis of the performance culture of educational institutions as

outlined above. It raises at least the possibility that educational leaders, students and parents who are abnormally focused on winning positive judgment of their performance from external others might actually be putting their students in jeopardy whereas leaders who seek to foster a healthy balance of learning goals and performance goals may well be more likely to be producing robust learners.

If, as Dweck points out, the tasks that are best for learning are those which risk confusion and error (p.16), then the aim of ‘facilitating learning’ would be to create obstacles that need to be overcome. Error would be welcome and explanation minimised. However, where error results in painful condemnation from external others who are marking, grading and measuring each move, then it is more likely that a student will avoid uncertainty at all costs, not embrace it for what it might conceivably offer to fresh understanding. So too an institution’s performance, dependent as it is on the judgment of external others, is vulnerable if and when its ‘mistakes’ (ie, a less than dignified place on league tables) are out in the open. When the price of failure is a lack of enrolments, diminished reputation, and/or a funding cut, it is to be anticipated that ‘best foot forward’ can become not simply an important imperative but the dominant imperative that renders all others to marginal status.

3 Paying attention

Once an imperative is relegated to the margins, we are, naturally enough, less likely to pay attention to it. Put another way, it is less likely to be identifiable when we map our “attentional economy” (Taylor, 2005). We want to explore this term briefly before indicating what this might look like in an actual study of what a principal does during the working day.

What we give attention to, and how that attention is given, are in the main products of our learning. That attention is controlled by the mental models that are activated in our mind. Our mind operates at a number of levels. In terms of the issues we are exploring here, two levels are of great importance – sub-conscious operations, and conscious operations. The latter are activated as ‘working memory’. The former operate outside of conscious control. And unlike the limited capacity of working memory, the subconscious has no limitations on its processing capacity. The irony here is that our most creative thinking is done without conscious control. Mindful thinking is the tip of the iceberg, irrespective of whether the focus is on learning or performance.

The essential point is that our attention, and our thinking, are based on mental models and schema that represent ‘reality’ in simplified ways. Some of those models and/or schema will be brought into our conscious attention, while others will be activated sub-consciously. In fact the vast majority of our mental activity is at the sub-conscious level. The iceberg is very large.

The mind works to make available to us the mental models that it anticipates we will need in a given context. This automatic ‘downloading’ from long term memory makes routine behaviour possible, whether that behaviour be at the level of a novice or expert. In fact, to interrupt routine behaviour is to interrupt any high level of performance – experts ought not think and act at the same time. So discussion of reflection-in-action is misleading, unless the action is relatively non-routine.

In terms of attention, the downloaded mental models serve as attentional filters. They indicate what we should give attention to, and the attention is given in ways that tend to confirm the particular model, or to allow minor adjustments through its operationalisation in the particular setting. Thus, the mental models also determine the factors within our sensory field to which we give attention. Put differently, our mental models are also our perceptual lenses, or blinkers, depending on your preference.

Because we are social animals, our mental models tend to be shared, rather than individualistic. Most school based learning attempts to achieve such shared outcomes, while basic social interaction requires shared expectations in relation to how others will behave.

What is more, social relationships depend on the sharing of understandings, or ways of interacting, and cultures are based on these shared and largely subconscious outcomes. All require mental models that are at least aligned. Leaders in school settings are likely to have invested considerable effort to ensure that certain understandings are shared by all staff. In many senses, leadership involves the achievement of such shared mental models.

What all this means, simply put, is that what educational leaders give their attention to is both conscious and sub-conscious, both individual and social. New expectations of schools and universities mean that adjustments are constantly being made around what is now important and what sorts of routine behaviour are most useful. In a culture increasingly focused on meeting external accountability demands by means of measuring the performance of educational institutions, educators’ new mental models are likely to filter out much that once went without saying as important. It is not that this is done cynically or with ideological intent, but that the mental models that come with the ‘performative’ territory’ are providing our lenses, our blinkers.

4 The tale of one principal

Below we provide some empirical data from a doctoral study in which all the authors have recently played a role. The data was gathered by a high school principal who studied her ‘attentional economy’ in action over a period of three working weeks. The analysis of the data recorded over the weeks led to the formulation of a number of different categories. These are presented in the two pie charts below:

Figure 1: Work Chart 1

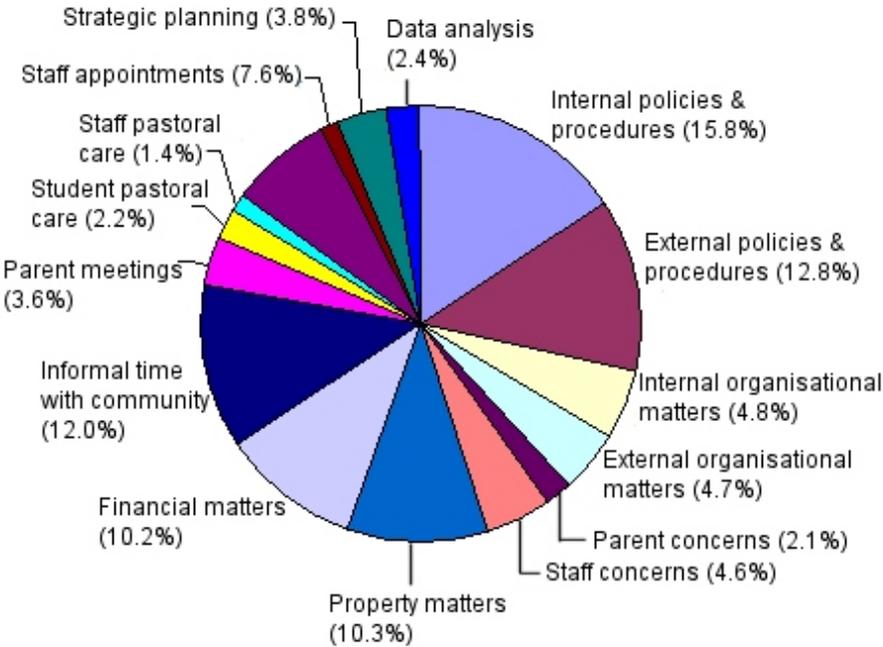
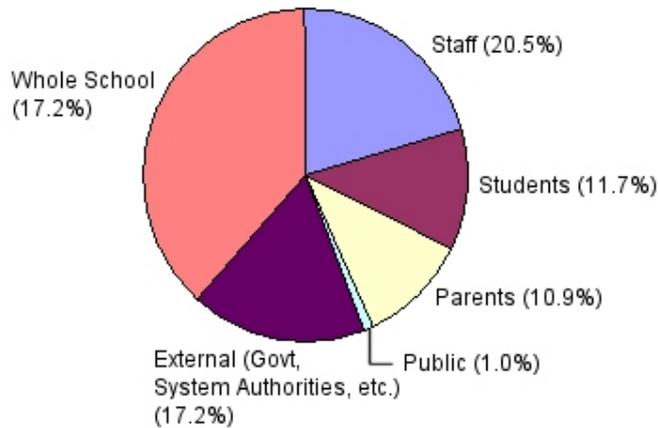


Figure 2: Work Chart 2



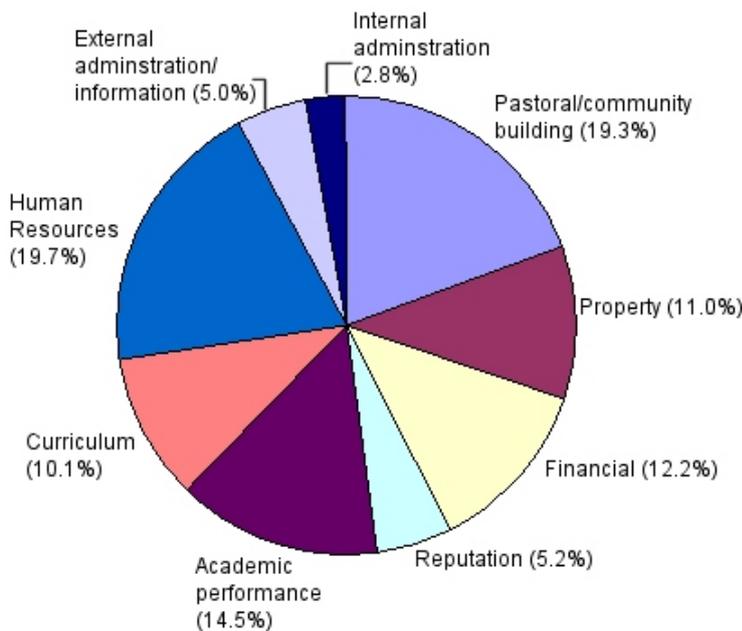
She then analysed the data recorded during the week to discern key categories of activity. Next she asked a number of colleague principals to review these data in light of the questions:

- How well does this recorded pattern of activity match your perception of how you spend their time?
- Are there any significant differences in this pattern when compared to your pattern of activity?

Following the feedback received after yet another phase of colleague feedback, she finally re-presented her 'attentional economy' in Figure 3 as

follows:

Figure 3:



The re-examination of the items from each of these categories revealed that a large proportion related to curriculum and academic performance issues (from the previous strategic and internal administration categories) plus human resources (from the external matters). Overall, this principal assessed her time as approximately two thirds (63%) focused on externally driven performance matters and only a little over one third (37%) taken up with internal matters to do with the educational and social life of the school. In addition to this overall picture, the data also

revealed the differential emphasis given to the two types of goals within particular categories of activities. Performance goals dominated almost all categories. For example, human resource activities during this week included the summative performance review of a person in a promoted position. The person was being reviewed against established duties and performance goals were a clear focus. A number of interviews for appointments to short-term acting promoted positions were also held during this week. Finalising the appointments was a clearly identified outcome at this time. In the category of pastoral and community, a large proportion of the time was spent on informal interactions with members of the community – attendance at sporting carnivals, playground interactions, parent social events, tuckshop visits and the like. These activities, by definition, were in many cases more directed at outcomes rather than strategies for improvement and thus were shaped by performance rather than learning goals. However, the nature of some of these activities, for example, discussing with

tuckshop helps new strategies for generating increased parent volunteers, were quite clearly underpinned by learning goals.

This tends to suggest, following Dweck, that, in this principal's balance of attention, there is a tendency to spend more time on attending to externally driven requirements rather than internal strategies around learning, and this is so despite the very strong commitment of this principal to learning as of paramount value in her school. It might well be argued that, as a secondary principal, this individual is under greater external pressure than her colleagues in primary or special schools. But it could equally be argued that education in the early years has even greater challenges, with increased parental anxiety about the safety and future success of their young children having such a big impact on this area.

Concluding remarks

While we could continue to debate the matter of which schools are under most pressure, it seems more useful to turn to the feedback this principal received from her principal colleagues in similar schools. The categories she developed were certainly recognisable to other principals; schools nevertheless did vary in terms of the sources of the pressure for their leader's attention. One colleague noted that a major strategic issue in his school was pastoral (in line with a review of their current horizontal pastoral structure) and that this consequently occupied more time than curriculum or academic performance matters. Another noted that the major strategic issue in her school was a review of the positions of added responsibility structure and thus human resources were currently occupying a bigger proportion of the principal's time. Two further colleagues felt that academic performance was not given the amount of specific attention in their schools in comparison with this principal's analysis as depicted in her work chart. The focus in their schools was on broad curriculum issues.

Yet while schools differed in certain respects, all school leaders shared a profound sense of the uncertainty and instability of the environment both within and outside schools, and their frustrations with a rising number of externally-driven demands to measure the performance of the schools, at times in ways that are suspect in terms of their value for learning. With all that we now know about the importance of experiment, risk-taking, contestation and unresolvedness in producing knowledge, it becomes crucial that we protect spaces that allow such modes of engagement. To do so, we need to pay attention to the learning goals of those within all educational institutions, not just their performance goals. And this needs to be re-asserted across the entire spectrum of education, even despite and contrary to, the desire to be awarded the maximum available number of gold stars.

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Erica McWilliam's career has involved 36 years as an educator, 17 of which have been as an academic working in the Faculty of Education at QUT, the largest faculty of education in Australia. She is an internationally recognised scholar in the field of pedagogy, with a particular focus on the sociology of youth, post-compulsory schooling and higher education. Erica is well known for her contribution to educational reform and its relationship to "Over the Horizon" work futures in the context of the new knowledge economy across the entire spectrum of formal learning environments from early years to doctoral education within university contexts. Her trans-disciplinary location across Education, Creative Industries and the Social Sciences is demonstrated through her current Carrick Institute Associate Fellowship (*Developing pedagogical models for building creative workforce capacities in undergraduate students*), her leadership of the Creative Workforce research program

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She has utilised cutting edge ideas from all these disciplinary fields to investigate how best to prepare young people for creative work futures at a time of social flux. Her recent scholarship on what she terms the Yuk/Wow Generation, presented at the recent *Creativity or Conformity?* Conference in Wales, builds on her long-term research into pedagogical processes and the impact of social change. Because of Erica's international reputation as an educational scholar and her outstanding ability as a public speaker, she was chosen by the Australian Council of Educators to deliver the prestigious biennial Bassett Oration, *Schooling the Yuk/Wow Generation*, in August, 2005.

As Assistant Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Education at QUT, Erica chairs the most successful Faculty Centre for producing educational research in Australia, QUT's Centre for Learning Innovation. Erica is also Chair of the Research Committee of Eidos, a research consortium of Queensland 'Smart State' universities and government agencies.