

Notes from the full interview with Jeanette Duffy

Deputy Rector – Teaching and Learning, and Leader of the PLG initiative

What was the initial impetus for setting up PLGs within the school?

- An NZCER staff survey carried out late in 2009 indicated a high level of dissatisfaction with current professional learning opportunities and systems.
- There was a lack of alignment between student data, student learning needs and teacher professional learning.
- There was a lack of alignment of professional learning with school strategic planning, annual plan therefore teachers felt they had too many goals and the goals were to do with compliance, rather than learning.
- Professional learning was viewed by staff as irregular and ad hoc.
- Leaders needed to be seen to be learning as well - Reading around BES re participating in and leading learning
- There was little evidence of teachers enacting 'teaching as inquiry'.
- This coincided with my having the opportunity to work as a professional learning facilitator for Learning Media that same year. Whilst in this role I often reflected on the nature of the learning we as facilitators provided for teachers to engage in. What seemed to be effective in terms of teachers truly engaging in learning and subsequent to that what led teachers to transfer theory to practice in their classrooms? All of this helped me frame the initial concept and shape for establishing professional learning groups within St. Patricks' College, Silverstream, on my return in 2010.

How were/are the PLGs set up? Has that changed over the two and a half years?

- The PLGs ran on Friday mornings during Term 2 and 3 and the BOT agreed to our students starting an hour later that day for staff learning to take place. Initially we offered a range of 5 PLGs for staff to opt in to. We aligned the PLG topics with the annual plan and with identified teacher learning need in the college. So, we had PLGs on Literacy, Clarity in the Classroom, Using FirstClass, Boys & Learning, Senior Engagement and Motivation. Each PLG was led by 2 teachers, all 3 members of the then SLT were leaders. Literacy & Using FirstClass were compulsory for staff as they were deemed to be priority areas for teacher learning, FirstClass being introduced during 2009 and through the literacy data of our 2010 Yr 9 & 10 cohorts. Each PLG varied in number from 11 – 7. A few suggestions were made to the leaders as to what each session could look like, but there was no actual learning for the leaders about how to lead the learning of teachers. The PLGs ran for 4 sessions, so teachers engaged in 4 different PLGs over the 2 terms.
- In 2011, acting on evaluation and feedback from teachers we made some key changes. Teachers had reflected on the lack of consistency across the PLGs – it was clear that not all of our PLG leaders had the skills to effectively lead the learning of teachers in the college. It was evident that in order to improve the quality of learning in the PLGs and greater consistency in the calibre of facilitation we needed to invest time and resourcing into 'growing' the capacity of our facilitators.
- Feedback from staff also indicated they did not appreciate certain PLGs being made compulsory and the 4 week cycle was deemed to be far too short.

- Expressions of interest to facilitate each PLG (lead the learning) and to engage in facilitator learning during Term 1, 2011, were sought from staff in T4 2010.
- As the Annual Plan for 2011 was being developed feedback from the PLGs, along with student data, helped inform the areas of teacher learning for PLGs in 2011.
- Training of PLG Facilitators took place over the course of Term 1, lead by Jeanette Duffy and Jo Grant (an external provider – Diverse Consulting)
- Facilitators engaged in 6 learning sessions to build skills and confidence to lead learning.
- The sessions focused on building cohesion and alignment with the Annual Plan, identifying facilitator need and developing effective facilitator skills to be able to lead the PLGs in Term 2 and 3 and revisiting teaching as inquiry to ensure it was central to all the PLGs.
- Criteria for effective facilitation at St. Patrick's College, Silverstream were co-constructed by the group of leaders.
- During Term 2 and 3 the facilitators were observed, they set some learning goals for themselves as facilitators, they received feedback on their practice against the co-constructed facilitator criteria and were supported with active reflection by JD and Jo Grant.
- Feedback from staff at the end of 2011 indicated a shift in the perceived quality of learning and facilitation from 2010 – 2011. In 2010 25% of staff felt the relevance of the content and the quality of the facilitation was unsatisfactory, in 2011 no staff measured this as unsatisfactory. In 2010 16% of staff rated the PLGs as Very Good (best rating) - and in 2011 37% rated them as Very Good.
- For 2012 our focus with professional learning has been to work towards aligning our professional learning with appraisal. We would like our appraisal to be a meaningful process, not a tick box exercise, so we were looking for a way in which we could align professional learning, appraisal, registration and attestation.
- We also wanted a PLG model with 'teaching as inquiry' at the heart, with the intention that this will result in greater transfer of theory to practice. Hence, all PLGs have the same 'umbrella' focus for a term and teachers frame an individual inquiry around their practice under the umbrella focus. The inquiries provide a mechanism whereby teachers can provide evidence of working towards RTC for appraisal and registration purposes. This model involves PLG leaders leading alongside the members of their group, not delivering learning. This shift in facilitator practice required further learning on the part of the PLG leaders, learning around mentoring, asking challenging questions, critiquing practice.
- We have built personal learning times into the term structure so teachers can reflect on where they are at with their inquiries, enact their inquiry, seek assistance from their critical friend or PLG leader
- We have also included a whole staff breakfast session at the end of the term where teachers will have the opportunity to share their inquiries with others not in their PLG.

Have you found that there's an optimum size for a PLG?

Currently we have 8 staff in each PLG (including the leader). We wanted to start establishing critical friends within our PLGs this year, hence the even number and we wanted a number where dialogue and critique was possible and where learning alongside each other was maximised. If the group is too small you don't get the exchange of ideas, sense of energy. Too large – it's trickier to ensure all are engaged and actively participating – it's similar to any class of learners, whether they are our students or our staff.

Do teachers choose their own group/focus, or is this decided by the school?

In 2010 and 2011 teachers chose the PLGs by topic and so the groups were naturally selected to some degree, although there was some scope for manipulation as I organised them into Term 2 or 3 groups. In doing this I would be looking to create groups with a range of age, experience, cross-curricular, mix of gender....

This year we have one 'umbrella' focus for each term and I have created the groups – again considering the factors mentioned and the experience of the PLG leader in leading teacher learning. The leaders were also asked for some input into the creation of these groups. This requires one to know the 'learners' well.

If so, what mechanisms are in place to ensure that teachers are happy with the group they're in?

I'm not sure that 'happy' is the right word. What we are trying to achieve are professional learning groups where all teachers can engage in their own inquiries, receive collegial support and critique from within the group. This year we have ensured that each group established their own protocols at the start of the first session – to me these are the 'guiding principals' by which that group have chosen to operate and it is the responsibility of the group to adhere to these protocols. There has been quite some discussion with leaders around how to establish critical friends within each PLG – some leaders paired up teachers after much discussion with myself about the 'best' fit, some leaders left this pairing to members within the group.

We have our 'resisters' as any school does – however I do believe the number of teachers in this category is decreasing, especially with the new model which gives them much more autonomy over their own learning. Our resisters now tend to be teachers who believe they have little to change about their practice (it works for them) and could better use their time to do marking or plan lessons.

What makes for a successful PLG?

Establishing protocols, leaders who are passionate and enthusiastic about their own learning and improving their classroom practice, creating groups of teachers to maximise learning, learning alongside and with each other (use each others' expertise, but no one is an expert), Lead Team learning alongside teachers, trying to keep 'teaching as inquiry' at the heart of the learning, looking for ways to move from theory to practice.

What do you see as the next developmental step in the PLGs? Do you see them as a sustained/sustainable practice within the school?

- The next developmental steps could include Departmental PLGs which are effectively led by a member of the department (not necessarily HOD), enabling departments to inquire into aspects of their practice.
- The sharing of leadership within the PLGs – not just one leader, but each member of the group is responsible for the learning of all in the group.
- Ongoing work aligning professional learning and appraisal – teachers confident in gathering evidence of working towards the RTC and storing it in the e-Professional Learning Portfolios on FirstClass.
- I am hopeful that by the end of 5 years (2014) PLGs and 'teaching as inquiry' have become the way we engage in learning at St. Pats and is therefore a sustainable practice in the college. By continuing to grow the internal capability of teachers to lead learning I see us moving towards sustained practice.

You have used two external providers. Why?

Using external providers is beneficial to bring an 'objective' perspective to the table. They have also supported us to step back at times from the detail to look at bigger picture. It is very easy to become very invested in a particular vision or direction around professional learning and external providers can bring some clarity to the purpose and structure of PLGs and where we want to head.

We have utilized their skills to build my capabilities around professional learning and to build the capabilities of teachers within the school to lead the learning,

Both Jo and Nicki have taken on the role of a 'critical friend' and mentor for me. They ask the hard questions, challenge my beliefs and thinking, provide me with professional readings to stimulate my thinking, provide support when the going gets tough.

What's been tricky about implementing PLGs in the college?

- Having a long term vision for teacher learning at St. Pats, Silverstream and not being too impatient to achieve this vision.
- Working alongside the 'resisters' and those staff who may view engaging in professional learning as 'extra' to their work, rather than as an integral of being a professional teacher. For me the challenge is to try to help these staff see the connections between their current work and practice and 'teaching as inquiry'. I also have had to make decisions about how much time I will invest in resisters.
- Some HODs and staff would rather use the learning time for Departmental meetings. There is often a tension between working in our curriculum areas, which often looks more like management and admin, than engaging in learning around pedagogy. This year we have dedicated the late start Tuesday during Term 1 and 4 to Department time and personal admin/learning in an attempt to address this tension.
- Involving part time staff and staff with commitments in the boarding hostel – the boarders need to be supervised during the late start so two teaching staff are not available to participate in PLGs.