



Australian Principals Centre®

# AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPALS CENTRE

## Monograph Number 13

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ISBN: 0 9750904 5 3

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## CONVERSATIONS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: THE VALUE OF RELATIONAL LEARNING

### DR GEORGE OTERO

#### INTRODUCTION

Conferences like the ones where I talked to Victorian Principals in August 2003 are about gaining inspiration, good ideas and incentive.

At the annual conferences of the Victorian Primary Principals Association (VPPA) and the Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals (VASSP), I was privileged to hear almost every single speaker and the themes that they raised.

Most of the speakers were fellow-educators, as might be expected, but it was fascinating at the VPPA conference to find that a speaker ostensibly from another context – the Victorian Chief Commissioner for Police, Christine Nixon – raised complementary themes. In effect, she said just about everything that a school improvement person needs to know. How people deal with each other transcends disciplines, cultures and work settings. It's all about relationships.

In my paper, I shall pick up on that theme as well as emphasising some of the related critical elements in school improvement, and considering some of the practical applications.

Over the last five years, I have visited Australia fourteen times, together with my wife and colleague, Susan Chambers-Otero. We have worked with teachers in schools across Victoria and other states. In exploring the nature of school improvement, I will draw upon our learning from that experience, as well as work we have undertaken overseas.

#### About personal agency

Another presenter at the VPPA conference said that researchers should only use six references. Similarly, speakers should try to get across only three of four main points in a presentation.

I really like that idea of speaking directly and to the point. Let me do just that, then, and say that improvement, at any level, boils down to **personal agency**. And the effectiveness of our personal agency depends upon the quality of our relationships. This has been our experience at the Taos centre and working throughout the world.

Where this starts – and where we've had our biggest impact – is with the young people in schools. We have helped them, and their educators, to get rid of the barriers that keep young people from learning to their full potential. We have worked closely with individuals, teams and school communities.

For twenty years my wife and I ran a multicultural Living Learning Community Centre, in Taos, New Mexico. We had the privilege of working with around 50,000 people over those years. We listened to what people said that they needed or wanted – mostly school folks and young people associated with the schools, but often community leaders, often people just trying to improve their lives.

For the last six years we have been sharing our experience with educators around the world, and simultaneously we have been learning from them. This paper is an extension of that sharing and learning process.



**Dr George Otero**

This paper has been developed from themes and material presented by Dr Otero in two keynote addresses: the first to the VPPA Annual Conference, on 4 August 2003; and the second to the VASSP Annual Conference, on 11 August 2003. Both conferences were held in Melbourne.

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## MORE THAN GOOD INTENTIONS

Recently I told a group of Victorian teachers that I thought I had finally conquered the pronunciation of “Melbourne”. I used to say “Mell Bourne”, with that heavy accent on both syllables that Americans tend to use. “How’s this?” I asked, and carefully said “Melbourne”, trying to come as close as I could to an Australian accent and intonation. What was the reaction? They laughed, because my pronunciation is still so far from correct. I know that, but I try. My intentions are the best; my efforts are as strong as I can manage.

Why am I telling this story? Because successful agency is not only about having good intentions or getting it ‘right’. Often we feel that if we have the right intention, and we just get the forms and procedures in line, then things will work out. But we live in a time where good intentions aren’t good enough.

Since being ‘right’, of itself, doesn’t make the difference for which we are striving, we have taken a further factor into account. Another level of our interaction with each other is necessary to develop the kind of intent, credibility and personal agency that we are seeking. We work in terms of **engagement** of the student or learner – for learning is not restricted to the student. We work very carefully to achieve the right tone. This qualitative aspect of learning is vital.

## CULTURAL FACTORS

In New Mexico, we have a tradition known as ‘Call and Response’. A singer sings a word or a line and the audience repeats it back. This tradition is not common to Victoria. I once saw the gospel group Sweet Honey and the Rock play here and was amazed that it took them about 45 minutes to get the Victorians into Call and Response. In the southern part of the USA the audience reaction would be instantaneous.

The difference extends beyond gospel music. I think of a meeting I attended in one of the Victorian school regions. The speakers were very courteous; as they stood up to speak, each one said “*I really won’t repeat what someone else has said*”.

Well in the south of the USA, and in the south-west where I’m from, that would actually be the most dishonouring thing you could do. What

people there want to do is get up and say “*Everything they just said I believe and I’m gonna go over it in detail one more time*”.

The Call and Response process can have disadvantages (and I have seen some southern church services, meetings and conference sessions go on to the small hours!), but it also has many virtues. It can be a critical element in giving each other clues about meaning and reinforcing mutual understanding. It is a powerful tool, especially where we are entering the uncharted area of change and innovation. It can help us through the hard work of risking ‘not-knowing’, of learning together as we go along, of taking challenges that we cannot control with a program or a policy.

Let me explore that tone, share the framework and outline a few very specific applications that you might use in building three kinds of conversation.

## CONVERSATIONS THAT LEAD TO CHANGE

Personal agency, as I suggested earlier, is the key. High quality relationships are the medium. Call and Response is a valuable tool and process. Where do we go from there? As another speaker at the VPPA conference noted, the destination *is* the journey.

On our journey, Susan and I have identified three kinds of conversation – interactions that you can lead, organise, catalyse, participate in yourself – which, in our experience, will produce immediate change.

The first of these is an **instructional** conversation. This is the one we see most often in the classroom. It is to do with a relationship in which our discussion is about acquiring skill, extra knowledge, perhaps career guidance material – something external to ourselves – a skill or ability.

The second conversation in which we can participate, and which we can open up to everyone, is a **learning** conversation. A learning conversation is closer to one in which our mutual growth is the end result. It matters greatly because it parallels dialogue, and dialogue is a conversation that you enter without knowing the outcome when you begin.

The third is **community** conversation. Community conversation is a vehicle for people



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to express and share the diverse views that they hold; to negotiate and reaffirm directions and vision.

Think of it as more like a verb than a noun. It is about the act of engaging. It is a process – to bring people together, to get everybody heard, with benefits for the learning of all concerned – rather than an end in itself. By discussing what we are educating for, we can build common but varied understandings. By doing so, we deepen our sense of community, or even create one, in some cases.

The importance of this type of conversation, within and beyond education, is indicated by the fact that Christine Nixon, the Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police, spent perhaps a third of her presentation time at the VPPA conference on this topic.

In our experience at the Taos centre and with schools around the world, these three conversations can become the framework for genuine school improvement. The success of this approach is not program-dependent, nor is it really skill-dependent. Let me discuss a little further how participation in these three conversations can impact on school improvement, the underpinning framework, and some possible directions.

## SOME EXAMPLES OF THE CONVERSATIONS

A simple example of initiating a learning conversation is for me to tell you a little bit about myself, or to get you to tell me about you. With a larger group, a classic strategy is to ask the “How many of you ...?” question. At the VPPA conference, I asked the audience how many of them were left-handed. It turned out to be a huge proportion – beyond the percentage I had ever seen in similar situations. I commented on that, and the fact that I had done this hundreds of times. I told the audience that I would bring some articles about left-handedness the following day and, in the meantime, quoted from another article, which I just ‘happened’ to have with me. This contained the following quotation:

*“Study says left-handers are born with a different brain. People who grow up left-handed have a different, more flexible brain structure than those born to take life by the right hand.”*

By the time I finished, the auditorium was buzzing with conversations. I identified with the participants – “*Could we hear it for the left-handers?*” I said. “*You never knew when you signed up that this might be the key information, your main take-away from the two days. And if that doesn’t work I have other ones.*”

The conversations burgeoned. This was not about great learning *per se*, but it was an example of what we’re looking for as the **tone** of a learning conversation. It’s not so much about specifics or surety, but rather a willingness to look at possibilities together, in the hope that we might find something greater than any one of us, in our exchange and interaction. Something that would **serve**. Compare that with what tends to happen now in schools, where our major emphasis is on what **works**. That is important but it will make you tired and frustrated, because nothing works all the time. Just check marriage if you’re looking for an example!

## THE PRESSURES ON EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

In the United States, we have found that education and nursing are different from the other professions – even more so than police work in some ways – and it is fair to assume the same is true in Australia. In particular this has to do with pressures.<sup>1</sup> In the USA, overload has reached crisis proportions as teachers are now formally held accountable for performing a range of functions for which they are not trained. In addition, many of those functions cannot be linked reasonably to changes in young people’s behaviour, either socially or psychologically.

It is interesting to gauge the range and scale of pressures teachers experience in their working situation – in particular, the feeling that they don’t have control over their own lives and the decisions they make. Think of the pressures you feel as principals, and the pressures that your staff members feel. Susan and I hear about these pressures all the time, in our interviews with school personnel.

Now, think of what it’s like for the students. Of all those who work within the system, they are the ones who most experience what researchers have called ‘learned helplessness’. The intent of the three conversations that I have identified, is to move people – students and teachers, specifically – of their own will and choice, out of that ‘learned helplessness’.

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School leaders can model this themselves, with conviction. In some ways, the principal can feel the most helpless in the system. If someone comes in without warning, a parent for example, the principal has to respond. As teachers, there are things like Curriculum Standards Frameworks – CSF I, II and perhaps III or IV in the future? – which place prescribed demands on the ways teachers do their work; this in turn determines parameters for how they feel about their role.

We need to take care when dealing with the sensibilities and conditions that people would like for their own learning. They can be very vulnerable in the context of our learning communities. What is the way through this? The use of learning conversations, and the adoption of the appropriate sharing tone within them, can provide one pathway – as we develop an ongoing willingness to open up to the possibility of our own learning. Within our own learning lies our leadership.

In a sense, what I have been looking at here is the expression of a framework, a philosophy and an approach for school improvement. We name it ‘relational learning’. The relational learning framework for school improvement has the simple focus of continuously striving to improve personal agency – by making everyone a learner and a leader, which are the two key functions of an education system, and working to develop the associated skills.

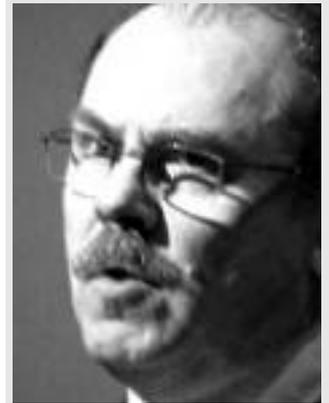
That is the area where Susan and I spend our time working with schools as educational consultants. It is fun. It is miraculous. It is powerful, and you never know what will happen. And that’s why people keep coming back.

In some ways, you could see it as the **art** of education. It reminds me of a story about the great artist, Robert Rauschenberg. An interviewer once asked him: “*Do you know what you’re going to do before you start painting? You’re going to use these huge canvasses, so surely you must have a plan when you go into your studio.*” And Rauschenberg said “*Are you kidding? If I knew what I was gonna paint when I went into the studio, I wouldn’t go!*”

You might want to use this great artist’s comment as a banner for your teaching. It could help get you through, one day, when everything seems too much. When I told this story to the Victorian principals, I could see some of the participants feeling freer immediately! I offered them another item of information to relieve some of the pressure that they perceive in their professional situations. I told them I had read in *The Age* that the best and most reliable predictor of school performance in Victoria is ... the postal code. Well hallelujah, you’re all free! Feel a little lightness when you think about the implications.

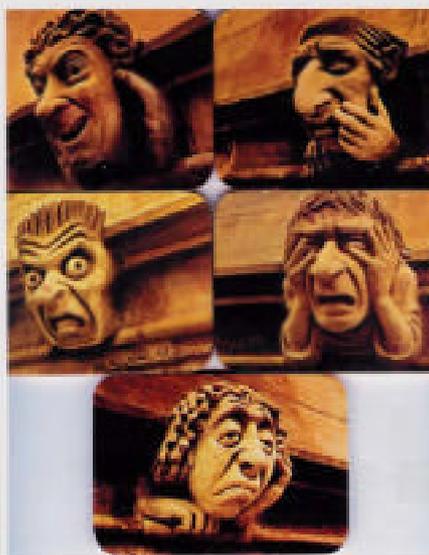
The faces depicted in Figure 1 are carved gargoyles, from buildings in Oxford. When you’re feeling stressed at school, which face best represents how you feel? When I used these images with the conference participants, there was a buzz of amusement, lively interaction and expressions of recognition, around the hall. We had the tone for a learning conversation.

The atmosphere within which teachers work is not always conducive to establishing that tone. Think how often you have heard teachers talk about the pressures of continually having to deal with ‘the next new change to come along’.



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Figure 1: Oxford gargoyles



Professor Tony Townsend, who first brought me to Australia, is one of many observers to comment on that. He talks about ‘the pendulum effect’, which is a phenomenon we share internationally. Teachers know about it. As I said to the Victorian principals,

*“When you go away to a conference, they’re just waiting for your return. They’re anticipating ‘the newest thing’ that you will bring back with you. And they have a response ready in the context of an established relationship. It’s a good relationship: you speak, the new movement comes in, and they duck. The key for them is to stay down just long enough to let the new movement pass by, because the pendulum will come back. And then you’ll go off to the conference next year and they’ll duck again.”*

In that sense, we are all the same. We too would duck, in similar circumstances. What would it take to engage us in a learning conversation? What needs to change for teachers to do so?

## ROLES AND FUNCTIONS

Knowing what we know about learning, we have created an institution for learning that has rigidified learning into roles. When those roles are the **function** of learning in the learning community, they are no longer really roles. ‘Teacher’ is not a role in learning – it is a function of the relationship. ‘Student’ is not a role, although we like to think it is – it is a function of the relationship. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, at times we are all students. If we don’t get to experience that, we lose the vitality of what we might become.

Then, of course, ‘leader’ is not a role – it is a function of learning in our global society. In promoting use of the three types of conversation, one of our aims is to demonstrate the power of de-emphasising, de-constructing, getting rid of, this concept of role-related relationships. We aim to help people move towards functional, learning relationships.

Everyone at some point can be the teacher, the student and the leader. But who knows when? People enjoy the experience of these

conversations and come back to renew their learning again and again. As teachers they get tired. They suffer what I think of as ‘Year 8 Syndrome’. They come in at the beginning of the year and there’s a little half hour of excitement. It gets a little less each year. By Year 8 there may still be the initial anticipation but then, all too often, everything becomes rigidified. What can we do about that?

## THINGS WE CAN DO – MAKING SCHOOLS MORE HUMAN

As a leader, you will sometimes feel that the solution you seek for a problem is just out of reach, or that you have just missed it. That’s one of Murphy’s Laws, like attempting to open a locked door with an armful of books. Chances are, you will find you have only one hand free and, inevitably, the door key is in the opposite pocket. In the school context, you might realise that you’ve sent a teacher off to camp when you need her in school for a vital Council meeting; or you might lose that one piece of paper which holds the very item of information you need at this particular second.

In some ways, you might say such things are beyond your control. Another way of looking at them is to say they are all very human. And any place where we come together to learn should be a human place – **human** and **humane** – in its operation, outlook and values. Schools should be about the humans within them – teachers, students, leaders, parents, administrators – and the relationships between those people. Ironically, in my opinion, the school as currently constituted tends to be one of the most inhumane places for people to be. There is little room for human vagaries or flexibilities. In real terms, choice and learning based upon interaction tend to be undervalued and under-represented.

We need to lead the way in humanising the school, by humanising ourselves again, and by modelling that process, through the use of the conversations I have described. We need to share our clear goals aloud, and work with teachers as they introduce, develop and maintain the conversations in their classrooms. It is a powerful experience for all the learners involved.

The magazine of the Association of California School Administrators focused on this sort of approach about a year ago. They talked about schools as **personalised** communities’ – not **individualised** communities, interestingly.



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Recently, in response to one of my conference presentations, Pam Russell, President of the Australian College of Educators in Victoria, talked about trends in educational approaches. Prior to the 1970s, she suggested, school education was characterised by **‘dependence’** – with students, in particular, dependent on their teachers for knowledge. In the 80s and 90s, we moved to **‘independence’**. In a period where the focus was on individualisation, we wanted everyone to be an independent learner.

In the new century, Pam suggested, we are moving through a transformation, to a model of **‘interdependence’** – which is not the sum of the previous two. It is about relationships, where we draw and share knowledge from a variety of sources. We need to know a wide range of skills — how to use them, how to decide which are the good ones, and how to select which ones are appropriate for particular tasks. Students need to learn discrimination and critical and analytical techniques. They do this with advice and support from their teachers. This is another reality; another experience. It is recognition of the need for interdependence that I think is behind the current emphasis, in Australia and overseas, on networking and collaboration in education.

How do we make this transformation happen? In one way, it is about recognising the context in which we live. That’s the first thing people check out in a relationship. In the USA we have seen interviewers check with children as young as three and four years old what they understand about their context and the parameters within which they operate. After all, children can’t just do what they do in a vacuum; they need to know the boundaries within which they are learning. They move in a world of exchanges between their expectations and ours. As their parents/educators, we need to be sure that they will not react blindly to things going on around them; that they will stop, look, and make an informed choice. When they get near a sidewalk, we want to know they’re not going to just follow their dog across the street without looking out for the traffic.

Art Costa talks about this sort of process as a **‘Habit of Mind’** – children are not born with it; they have to learn it and habitualise it. That is a **clue** about meaning and understanding. Working with young people, especially by the middle years, we find that they look at us and in all honesty think that we don’t have a clue about anything that’s of relevance to them. If you are a teacher or principal, their first thought is likely to be something like, *“You mean you went to school for all those years, and then came back???* And you’re still here???” ... Well!!!”

To build a partnership of learning and engagement with young people, it is critical that we realise they are a different species. You may not agree with that, but you don’t have to. Accept it for the moment and consider this. A few decades ago, a quite spectacular event effectively redetermined the context in which we live. It had to do with moving beyond our earthly confines, changing the human perspective. Once we got above the planet, and could see the earth as a whole – in person for a few, on a screen for the many – a new idea as powerful as any in history occurred. Every one of the 60-some astronauts noted that the transformation for them was not about getting to the moon, but looking back and seeing us as a **‘whole’** – a realisation of the interdependent nature of the human condition; of the fact that we can’t do this without each other.

If we interview or talk to students, or listen to their conversation, what comes through all too often is that they don’t think they’re needed. The Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police, talking to the VPPA, commented on the same phenomenon in police interchanges with members of the public – youngsters especially. They don’t think their voice will be heard; or that what they think will not be considered important. What was that about **‘engagement in learning’**? Is attendance really the only thing that matters?

Currently in Victoria, as elsewhere, school education is largely about benchmarks. What if we eliminated them? How would things be different? Or, taking another tack, what sort of benchmark could change the nature of the relationships between teacher and student, student and student, student and learning? What if **‘personal’ learning** means it’s about you? What if young people thought school was about them?

A couple of years ago my wife and I were south of Albuquerque, in New Mexico, watching a classroom lesson. It was the hottest time of the year, and the students were Spanish speakers in an English-speaking class. Their motivation to be there, let alone learn, was low. Attendance was down, to less than 40 per cent. What happened to turn that around? The teacher saw and seized what we call a **‘teachable moment’** – an event or a change of atmosphere perhaps – which provides a window of opportunity to try something different. In the case I am describing, this was to use one of the three conversations I have outlined, for everyone to discover their own insight and experience.

This teachable moment came about because the day before had been the Columbine shootings. All the kids wanted to talk. And they all wanted



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to talk at once. The teacher organised a discussion, giving each student three coloured sticks. These were to be used like tokens. Everybody would have an equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion. It would be important to think about what you were going to say, because each time you said something, you would have to give up one of the sticks.

One of the boys said: *“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard”*. “Well,” the teacher replied, *“that’ll cost you a stick”*. “But, I don’t want to give one”, the boy said. *“That’ll cost you another stick”*, said the teacher.

This is a very quick version of the story, but the point is that the students were simultaneously being given a voice and some boundaries to help ensure that each voice was heard. They saw that each person’s view was equally valued; that the more talkative students would not dominate the input of more diffident class members; that they would be listened to; that it was worth participating in a discussion about something that affected them deeply at a personal level. The sticks added a symbolic element of motivation.<sup>2</sup>

Once they had the voice and the tools, the students took it from there. In a week and a half the students were writing their own questions. They were managing their own discussions and learning via a combination of instructional conversations and learning conversations. The teacher could stand back. The lovely part was that they were inviting the teacher either to come to the discussions or to mark assignments if she preferred.

More generally, over the next two weeks, student attitudes towards schooling also changed. Word got around. Attendance rose to 98 per cent. We interviewed the teacher and asked her what had made the difference. It was about having that voice; about being able to manage their own learning; about mutual respect; about valuing and being valued; about finding new relevance and interest in the opportunities that the school environment provided.

Where did that leave the teachers and the school? There was a new relationship. One of the students commented on the fact that the students still needed the teachers to be there, but that there was a new realisation of the teachers’ need for the students to be there: *“We come to school because they can’t run the school without us!”* There is a symbiotic relationship. That is the kind of agency we are talking about developing, and there are hundreds of ways in which we can demonstrate it.

## DEVELOPING THE AGENCY

As school leaders, how can we work with our staff members to develop, apportion and spread this agency? It starts from holding just such a conversation, with the teachers. It does not start by taking an overt position, where they know you are assuming what it is that they need to do.

Often, when I’ve observed lessons, students have seemed slow or wary about answering a teacher’s questions. When I’ve asked them why, common responses have included:

- I was waiting to get some clues about what answer the teacher wanted; or
- I knew if we waited, s/he’d give us the answer after five or ten seconds.

Both responses are based on the assumption that the teacher knows the answers; that only the teacher knows exactly what answer s/he wants; and that there is little point in putting an answer forward outside that framework. The same can be said about too many meetings that take place between teachers and their principal.

How do we get around that? The conversations – and how they are perceived by those involved – need to change. The best retreats, in-service workshops or professional development meetings that I have had with teachers are ones where there is:

- no prescribed agenda;
- nothing they have to do as a result of the get-together, and
- an understanding that they set the agenda if they want to.

Let’s say a meeting is called. What assumptions do teachers make when they come along? Why do they think they are there? *“I’m doing something wrong”*, is a response that we often hear.

In the professional development activities that we share with schools, we start by asking a question which is important to both principal and teachers, but which is phrased in a way that does not imply preconceptions about the answer. An example would be: *“Do schools need to change?”*. If anything, we start with the sense that maybe they don’t. After all, as I noted before, the postal code reigns anyway, as far as student achievement measures are concerned.

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What does this approach achieve? It lightens the energy and spirit. It brings people forward to start to do what they need to do, which is to speak the truth.

How to get this approach off the ground? I would say just go ahead and have these conversations. I believe in them. Using them as the basic way of communicating in the classroom will change the way you feel about teaching and learning. To my mind, we have been deliberating under a myth perpetuated by a particular form of pedagogy. Our teaching and learning have been undertaken in ways that prevent learning based on what we know from our own experience and research.

To move away from this restrictive model feels very **freeing** to teachers, in my experience. That's what we're looking for, more freedom, so we can be more courageous.

Our current traditional format can be portrayed as a triangle (see Figure 2, below). You can run the arrows anyway you want to: teachers to students; students to teachers. As one person said to me, you could turn the triangle – because there are more students, so to put the teachers at the bottom in some ways would be a more accurate depiction – but it's still a triangle.

In the USA, and increasingly in countries that emulate the “American way”, there is a pernicious myth. There is general faith that any person who works hard enough and tries his/her best, just may be able to earn a million, buy that Mercedes-Benz, reach the top of the corporate heap, become President, whatever. In the Victorian context, an educational parallel would be the belief in the grail of VCE and university registration. Achieve those totems on the basis of your labours and the sky's the limit for where you can go!

Now, this is fine, except for the fact that it assumes the possibility of genuinely individual achievement. In fact, we know that no-one performs in a vacuum; nobody can get to the good spots without help from others, or without the baggage of a social context. In business, no individual is likely to get to 'the top' unless it's on the backs of a whole lot of other people.

That kind of inequity, with layers of hierarchy to transcend, stands in the way of school improvement. When you, as principal and leader, say “We can do this better” and follow that statement with “we'll just keep trying and we'll get through it”, they know you're lying. It can't work. The truth isn't being spoken. If something has been tried over and over again, and it's not working for all the students, all the repetition in the world will not make it work any better – however well-intentioned, 'necessary' and 'right' it may be from the teacher's point of view.

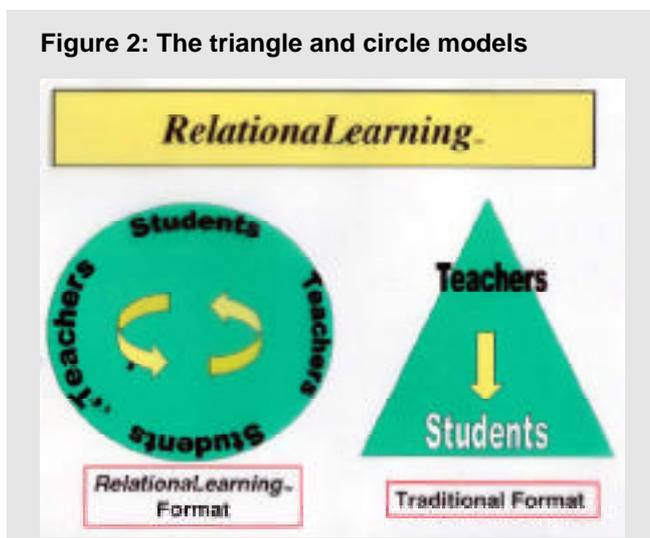
Similarly, you can have a hundred conversations without achieving personal agency and different quality relationships. Relational Learning (or **RelationaLearning**, as we term it) implies that we need to look at a circle as a model (see Figure 2, below), and circles within circles, with the learner in the centre, rather than the triangular model implying positions in a hierarchy that we currently have. This should not come as any surprise. All cultures, all traditions know that positive relationships are based on friendship, talking and engagement. Students know that. Once the learner is in the centre, we can all be a student, teacher and leader when we need to.

In the school context, there is only one kind of reform that will work: teacher-led reform. I make this assertion because it is my firm belief, based on the nature of who the people are and where they are placed in a particular system. In



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Figure 2: The triangle and circle models



my estimation, principals are not capable of making substantive change in schools; least of all in the classroom. But the teachers are. That is why we concentrate on their attitudes towards relationships.

We encourage teachers to use the three conversations and focus on 5 relationships.

- 1 Internal interaction with self;
- 2 Interaction between self and subject;
- 3 Interaction between self and others;
- 4 Interaction between self and teacher; and
- 5 Interaction between self and community.

For the moment, we do not get involved in student/parent relationships and student or peer relationships. What happens in these two relationships through the use of the three conversations *is* important territory, but we have not explored it through research or looked at its effect on practice.

We are working with a number of schools in Victoria and South Australia, where they have made these relationships the subject of their discussion. They categorise and reframe their programs and activities according to the particular relationship that they are building. The three conversations are integral to the learning process. What the schools report is that another kind of pedagogy is emerging – one that is characterised by natural conversations or dialogues between teachers and students.

If you want to explore some of the possibilities of conversation in education more fully, I can recommend Margaret Wheatley's book, *Turning Toward One Another*. She comments on the power of conversation as a natural vehicle, and discusses how we can tap that power.

In all three conversations, we go through a series of processes. These are nothing new; every human does the same in developing a conversational relationship, without necessarily being conscious of doing so.

## 1 Survey

I gave an example of this earlier. We can ask a range of questions to invite engagement:

- How many of you ...?
- What do you think about ...?
- How are you feeling about ...?
- Is this going to go anywhere? Where might it go?

## 2 Test

Human beings in any conversational relationship test things out. They try things out. They ask each other questions to check mutual levels of understanding about particular topics. Children are always asking questions to check how well they understand what they have learned. Most testing in schools tends to be about retention of information, but I am talking here about much more than content; I am talking about the nature of teaching and learning. We have worked directly with over 3000 students and their teachers in Victoria exploring that.

We have talked to teachers about how to work with students. More importantly in many ways, we have talked to students about how to work with students; asked them what they understand about how they learn and how teaching fits into that. It is informative and it's fun. Students know a lot about learning, and in many cases they say quite clearly how they think things could be improved. They are just not asked very often. They tend to walk away from our interviews with more incentive and more sense of personal agency. They have been listened to.

How often do teachers habitually test not only student learning about **what** they have taught, but also the learners' perceptions of **how** they have taught it, and **how** the students have learned it? What is **caught** is rarely what is **taught**.

## 3 Sharing

Sharing is critical. We encourage students to talk to students and to teachers, affirming and building common senses of meaning and understanding.

Sharing occurs in any conversation. It may not even come verbally – often actions and reactions are about non-verbal communication – but the sharing is going on in any conversation or relationship. It is just impossible to avoid. Is this a good meeting? Is the conversation feeling comfortable for me? Is it uncomfortable, making me physically or metaphorically 'itchy'? Did that idea make sense to me? Should I seek clarification or shall I wait and talk to one of my mates afterwards? Or should I duck and let it go through to the keeper? Consciously or subconsciously we go through these processes. Others pick up on your reactions.

The three conversation types offer ways to make the sharing more valuable to all concerned.



*Most testing in schools tends to be about retention of information, but I am talking here about much more than content; I am talking about the nature of teaching and learning.*

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## 4 Incorporation

The results of research on learning and relationship show clearly that there needs to be time for incorporation. If you don't get to make the learning your own in some meaningful way, it won't ever serve you. That is very different from just doing what works. Some very interesting research has been done on student achievement in maths, comparing what happens when students do straight pen-and-paper tests, with what happens when they do standing reviews where they can incorporate their own choices about what they know and don't know. The 'incorporation' model has been associated with raising test performance.

## 5 Reconciliation

I learned the importance of reconciliation in Australia. Reconciliation is a process of whether you decide how what you're doing serves you and the larger community. Once you are invited into a relationship, what is in it for you? In terms of learning relationships, when young people don't feel they're in charge of their own learning, they leave us – mentally, spiritually, socially and every other way.

## 6 Change

Finally you get change. Working with teachers on the three conversations and the five relationships impacts on their thinking and, in turn, on their working environment. The tone of their classroom changes when the conversations and relationships are fully integrated with the teaching and learning that takes place. The new atmosphere has three qualities:

- we find we are suspending judgement;
- there is a quality of playfulness; and
- there is a quality of imagination – we are getting to play with ideas, our thoughts, our feelings, we're being surprised.

The 'cost' is that we are moving beyond that comfort zone where we feel in control. Loss of highly-focused control – especially when allied to the sharing of trust within a relationship, which is an essential ingredient in what I'm talking about – may be about taking unfamiliar risks, but it is not about a descent into anarchy. It is about developing different dynamics and exploring new possibilities – for better outcomes, for a larger proportion of the participants in school education. Try it for yourself

## BRIDGING STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL REFORM

What I have talked about so far is effectively a philosophical approach to underpin practice. What we've been finding with educators, is that they're looking for applications. I am therefore suggesting ten bridging strategies for quality school reform, which relate to the philosophy and which emerge from our conversations with educators throughout Victoria, South Australia and the United States. The following are stages to go through if the philosophy is to transfer into embedded practice, at local and/or statewide levels.

- 1 Promote and practise the new type of conversation/dialogue
- 2 Develop relational trust
- 3 Build and nurture community
- 4 Develop a personalised and hopeful learning culture
- 5 Focus on supporting creativity and renewal
- 6 Emphasise the importance of play in learning
- 7 Foster civic engagement, both locally and globally
- 8 Initiate partnerships with school staff, young people, parents and community
- 9 Develop everyone as student, teacher and leader
- 10 Incorporate other ways of knowing in teaching and learning

Teachers have been asking for more conversations about these ten areas. We will be working on them with informal networking, over the next two years, around the world.



*In terms of learning relationships, when young people don't feel they're in charge of their own learning, they leave us – mentally, spiritually, socially and every other way.*



... schools with a high degree of 'relational trust' are more likely to make the kinds of change that help raise student achievement.

## TRUST IS THE KEY WORD IN CHANGING SCHOOLS

The approach I have advocated in this paper has a firm basis in school improvement research and hard classroom practice. As I suggested earlier, one key element is essential for it to be successful in practice. That element is trust, as the following example illustrates.

In an article in the Harvard Education Letter, David Gordon reported on the results from a 10-year study, of reforms in Chicago Public Schools, undertaken by researchers Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider. The schools developed a set of seven questions during the research project, in four categories (A-D, below), which related to developing relational trust.

### A Respect

Q1 Do we acknowledge one another's dignity and ideas?

Q2 Do we interact in a courteous way?

### B Competence

Q3 Do we believe in each other's ability and willingness to fulfil our responsibilities?

### C Personal regard

Q4 Do we care about each other both professionally and personally?

Q5 Are we willing to go beyond our formal roles and responsibilities to go the extra mile?

### D Integrity

Q6 Can we trust each other to put the interests of students first, especially when tough decisions have to be made?

Q7 Do we keep our word?

For around eight of the ten years, teachers in every one of twenty-or-so schools asked each other these questions on a regular daily basis. That may sound artificial, but it kept shared priorities

and vision to the forefront in every classroom. In effect it was like the Call and Response process that I talked about earlier in this paper, which is about affirmation of a group relationship.

Bryk and Schneider found that the schools using the questions improved their performance. The same was not true over the same period for schools that did not use the questions – they continued with all kinds of programs and efforts, but they were not learning communities in the same way as the schools that used the questions. What they were doing was not personalised, so it didn't make the same difference.

You could take these questions to your school and use them tomorrow with your teachers. The questions are generic, not culture-specific, although a variation on the Call and Response kind of exchange might well be, in an Australian context.

To get the questions into regular use, however – as a daily exercise to confirm the shared aims and to exchange examples of how the criteria are being met – the interchange must be explicit, and inclusive of staff. It is not enough as an individual or group to say “*Oh yes, we're doing that*” and carry on doing what you've always done.

One practical consideration to take on board is the need to commit your most precious resource to this new approach. The process of questioning, sharing, affirming and consequent culture-building will require **time** to be set aside. Reform takes time in every sense.

The effort is worth it. On the basis of the Chicago results, Bryk and Schneider concluded that schools with a high degree of 'relational trust' are more likely to make the kinds of change that help raise student achievement. Improvements in such areas as classroom instruction, curriculum, teacher preparation and professional development have little chance of succeeding without improvements in a school's social climate.

Bryk and Schneider wrote that:

*“Trust is the ‘connective tissue’ that holds improving schools together ... Although power in schools, as in most institutions, is not distributed evenly ... all parties are ultimately dependent on each other to succeed ... On a daily basis, trust is raised or diminished depending on whether the way we act – and why – is consistent with the expectations we have agreed to ...”.*

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They contend that:

*“the fulfilment of obligations entails not only ‘doing the right thing’, but also doing it in a respectful way, and for what are perceived to be the right reasons.”<sup>3</sup>*

How does your school measure up to these criteria? If you are a principal, how would you answer Chicago’s seven questions? How would your teachers answer? What would you list as evidence if you were asked to write down examples of how trust is raised in your school culture? How might changes in educational conversations, relationships and trust help your school achieve its goals?

## FINAL COMMENTS: WHY IS RELATIONAL LEARNING IMPORTANT?

Perhaps you have read this far and are not convinced. Maybe you would feel more secure, in your school leadership or classroom teaching, by staying with more traditional pedagogy – a more teacher-centred delivery or locus of control in the learning environment, rather than the conversations and relationships I have advocated.

Let me say this. I am prepared to bet that you have at least some students who are at risk of becoming disengaged from school learning – however small the school. Those who fail to attend may only be the few who speak with their feet. Others may be sitting quietly but with varying degrees of involvement in the learning that teachers expect of them. If you want to generate higher levels of engagement, learning and achievement across your student cohort, ask the students – and listen to what they say.

In New Mexico, attempts at school reform included work on an initiative called *Deadlines* '98. In what was quite an innovative approach, students were involved in the discussion. Among other things, they were asked to prioritise the most important elements, for them, from a list of 10 items to do with learning in schools. The results were startling and consistent.

The top three elements stood out from the others by a long way. The **third** most-important element, the students said, was to have **high quality teachers**, who were paid a high salary to match their high quality skills and input.

The **second** most-important element was to have **opportunities for achievement in areas that they saw as meeting their life goals**.

Ahead of all other elements, on every survey of students across the state, the **most important** element was **improvement in student commitment to their own learning**.

When I have given the list of ten elements to school leaders and asked them to guess what they thought the ‘top three’ would be, according to the students, they have rarely identified them with any ease. Frequently, the element that was a clear Number One for the students is guessed last by the school leaders, after almost all the others have been eliminated. This is not a criticism – but it speaks volumes about how far we have to go in developing the best possible ways of promoting learning in schools.

## Endnotes

- 1 For further discussion on issues relating to pressures, see George Otero and Tony Townsend’s paper on *Managing Complex Change*.
- 2 Also see two of my books: *Skills for Democracy: Promoting Dialogue in Schools*; and *Teachable Moments*, both published by Hawker Brownlow Education.
- 3 Material in this section was drawn from David Gordon’s ‘Fuel for reform: The importance of trust in changing schools’, *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August 2002, Vol 18, No 4. This material was also quoted in ‘Trust is the key word in changing schools’, in *Results*, journal of the National Staff Development Council, October 2002, p 5.

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ISBN: 0 9750904 5 3

This paper was prepared for Australian Principals Centre by Keith Redman and Jessica Redman, Keith Redman & Associates Pty Ltd.