



Loader: Incrementalism is not enough

# Incrementalism is not enough

SHORT-TERM THINKING AND INCREMENTAL CHANGE WITHIN EXISTING PARADIGMS AND WORLDVIEWS SIMPLY WON'T SOLVE THE SEEMINGLY INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS OF SOCIETY OR SCHOOLS, SAYS **DAVID LOADER**.

When we believe 'this is the way things are,' we merely tinker with what's wrong, changing some things on the periphery. An alternative is to refuse to accept what fate, history, the system, our superiors, 'they' or whatever have dealt us, and to think and act boldly. Liberating the imagination and passion of everyone in our community is essential if we want to move forward. This isn't some new form of radicalism, but a pragmatic call to take responsibility for creating our world. Short-term thinking and incremental change within existing paradigms and worldviews simply won't solve the seemingly intractable problems of society or schools.

There's a human tendency to feel comfortable with present systems and beliefs, so we try to change as little as possible; the future is a mere extension of the present. And then something happens like the series of coordinated suicide attacks by Al-Qaeda upon the United States on 11 September, 2001. This was in no way an incremental variant of what was happening on September 10. As a result, travellers no longer felt safe on aeroplanes or visiting some countries, airlines failed and our nation and allies found it necessary to go to war. Similarly, since the financial crisis, we're no longer confident about our jobs, our investments, our superannuation or our futures. Can we therefore be sure that things as they exist today will continue?

Such changes disrupt our lives and profoundly disturb our thinking. 'The known' turns out to be not as known as we had assumed. The comfortable linear progress of society is, it turns out, dictated by serendipity, complexity and potential chaos. Even our cherished democracy has substantial flaws – consider the way our political processes lead our governments to enable

unsustainable growth – so that democracy becomes subverted by forces whose interests come before those of the people.

Instead of burying our heads in the sand, we can use our understanding to free ourselves from past mindsets and incremental change. We can do that by giving weight to the present and its problems, for example, inequality in Australia, without necessarily accepting that the present is 'just the way things are.'

If we want to think afresh, we can use our values as a starting point. Instead of competitive relationships where everyone is self-focused, could we develop symbiotic relationships where we go beyond acknowledging our dependence on each other, to seeking to develop relationships of mutual benefit? Could we move on from schools as static institutions to schools as dynamic ecosystems, organic networks of learners and teachers? Instead of planning for results, could we be navigating towards realising potential in terms of the growth of the whole person? Instead of the simplicity of Cartesian knowledge, can we move to handling quantum knowledge and complexity theory? Instead of personal mastery in terms of Year 12 results, could we set network mastery as a community of supportive learners as our goal?

Consider the current inequity in education. In Australia, there is significant inequality in the outcomes from schooling, not just between sectors like private and public, but also within each sector. There has been significant money spent to reduce the gap between high-performing and low-performing students in Australia, but it remains unacceptably large. Given the complexity of the social context, schools, as they are funded and focused today, aren't

able to deliver opportunity and relevance in socially disadvantaged communities. We need to rethink the whole question of delivering learning in such a way that all students benefit, not just the few. I don't believe that league tables and other such bureaucratic creations will solve this. We need to be looking for new initiatives that may not even come from within existing schools, given that the parameters of the problem are as diverse as family background, community mores, institutional arrangements, the labour market, individual abilities and learning styles.

Incrementalism is how we naturally think and it's getting us nowhere. We have closed system thinking, offering students basically more of the same, if with increasingly higher quality. We need to break away from incrementalism by envisioning, choosing and then working towards a better future; refusing to accept that what exists can be made to work merely with some tinkering.

The past, present and our possible future don't flow in some linear, sequential way. It's important to understand and value both our past and our present, as well as to define where we want to go into the future. Equally it's important not to restrict the future to being a simple extension, an incremental variant, of the present.

Let's be bold in our visions and recognise that incrementalism is not enough. **T**

*David Loader is an education consultant and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. His latest book is *Jousting for the New Generation: Challenges to contemporary schooling*, published by ACER Press. Email [davidloader@bigpond.com](mailto:davidloader@bigpond.com)*