

Pivoting Toward Cultural Transformation

Penny Couch, Principal, Woodcrest State College Primary School, Queensland Australia

In the business world, ‘pivot’ describes a purposeful shift in strategy or direction. In education, this is a regular undertaking – one assesses what is working and adjust the implementation strategy accordingly. The pace at which one implemented change prior to the pandemic however was different; factors including leadership style, experience, knowledge, readiness, and even willingness, could be taken into account. During 2020, we had no option but to respond. In this article an experienced school leader provides an account of how cultural transformation, in what can only be described as, challenging times.

OF THE MANY new words the novel coronavirus introduced to our collective vocabulary, ‘pivot’ has become a personal touchstone. It’s a term I found myself using regularly in 2020, as we responded – often urgently – to a school environment in flux.

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Although the past school year presented extraordinary challenges, my team at Woodcrest State College also experienced many positive outcomes. We recognised opportunities, innovated, and shifted strategy purposefully.

I would describe my journey as: I challenged myself, and empowered my teaching staff, to ‘pivot’. This mindset allowed us to be ‘comfortable in the uncomfortable’. Permission was granted to break away from rigid practices and to explore innovative, agile teaching options. However, what delighted and surprised me most has been a cultural transformation and leadership growth – my own and that of others – that is directly benefiting students.

I attribute this transformation, at least in part, to the support of colleagues who have had a profound impact on my leadership and with whom I had shared experiences prior to the pandemic. In April 2019, I had been fortunate to have participated in the QASSP Study Tour to the United States Pacific Northwest. The itinerary had included a visit to Dayton Junior

High and High School in Oregon to explore their Innovation Academy. Led by then principal Jami Fluke, the school was a pioneer in developing new teaching methodologies utilising an agile learning approach. Their partnership with Innovate Oregon, an initiative launched by the Technology Association of Oregon, and engagement with one of its Directors, Thompson Morrison, had transformed the school and community.

Our group's interactions with students confirmed they were empowered learners and meaning makers engaged in authentic learning that was personally important to them. Collectively we sensed something special was occurring.

I was inspired to implement these practices within Woodcrest State College; little did I realise exactly what impact this visit to Dayton would have. On my return, and with my leadership team, I examined how we might reimagine the educational experience for our students and implement some of the agile practices

I had observed at Dayton High. Several staff members had already experienced agile practices in previous schools; we commenced our journey with further research into inquiry-based learning. Aware of the critical role they would play, we sought interest from those who would become our 'early adopters' – who would model innovation and be essential in the transformation of our culture (Morrison, Fluke & Cunningham, 2020, p. 141).

We developed a statement of purpose: *'To empower all students to engage in rich, authentic learning opportunities through individualised instruction and innovation'*. This demonstrated to all staff our commitment to agile practices and provided a platform to challenge the conversation and explore innovative approaches to curriculum planning and pedagogy.

In March 2020, just as our early adopters were beginning to inspire their colleagues to have the courage to experiment with inquiry-based learning in a face-to-face environment, the pandemic struck. Amid the initial response, I wondered how and when we might return the conversation to a focus on authentic learning and innovative practices. A new opportunity was to provide the answer.

I received an invitation from Dr David Turner, QASSP's Director of Professional Learning, to be part of an experiment. This was a 'pivot' in itself – the result of the forced cancellation of QASSP's 2020 Study Tour due to the coronavirus. The planned itinerary had included a workshop led by Thompson Morrison and Jami Fluke to unpack the learning framework that had been developed at Dayton High. I said 'Yes', not really knowing what I was jumping into, but curious to know more.

Figure 1.



Involvement by the whole team allowed us to share a common experience. We engaged more deeply in conversations, and we listened to each other more intently about how what we had experienced might be implemented in our context.

Over five days during the Easter break, seven members of the 2019 Study Tour group participated in what Thompson Morrison referred to as a ‘DIG’. This process adapted agile practices to the classroom. DIG stands for Designed InGenuity and is described as ‘*A learning framework for the creative mind*’. Together, we placed ourselves in the shoes of a learner and courageously took a leap into the unknown. Participation required me to be vulnerable, to trust, have courage, be resilient, persistent and patient – I experienced enlightenment, joy, wonder ... and a thirst for more.

I couldn’t wait to share this experience with my colleagues; I was convinced this was the next step we needed to take in our exploration of agile practices. I sensed the best way to do that was to have them walk into the unknown, just as I had, so that they could feel what I had felt. Two weeks later, at the beginning of Term 2 and while implementing remote learning, my leadership team and I completed a DIG.

Involvement by the whole team allowed us to share a common experience – to face similar feelings, challenges, joys and wonders – together. We could collectively see and feel a new possibility. We engaged more deeply in conversations, and we listened to each other more intently about how what we had experienced might be implemented in our context.

To maintain the fidelity of what had been created at Dayton High, I took the opportunity to engage Thompson Morrison as our innovation guide, to steer us through the journey ahead. It was through this coaching that I came to understand the key role of personal storytelling in any transformational change process. When I reflected on my visit to the school in Oregon, it was the stories the students had told that had sparked my curiosity and prompted the realisation that I had encountered something special.

Thompson Morrison challenged me to consider how I might share our leadership team’s stories with our teaching staff. The goal was to spark their curiosity. We decided to model a practice – called an ‘In and Out’ – that had been demonstrated to us by the students of Dayton

High. Through this process we re-engaged our early adopters and formed a cohort for the next DIG. We have since undertaken another two DIGs and at least a third of our staff have experienced the framework.

I was surprised and delighted to see, once we had returned to face-to-face learning at the end of Term 2, that some courageous individuals wasted no time to experiment with the Designed InGenuity learning framework in their classrooms. Once again, though, the question surfaced: How to keep this enthusiasm and momentum for experimentation occurring amongst our early adopters, and inspire courage for more to experiment? Experimentation is an important aspect of agile practices and requires trust in an environment that provides safety to risk failure and feel support.

At the beginning of Term 3, when we seemed to have settled into a new norm for schooling, as a leadership team we revisited our purpose with all staff, demonstrating through our words and actions that we were keen to support them in their classroom experimentation. We created a space and a regular time for sharing, careful not to make this too scripted, as we didn't want to risk losing the joy. This regular sharing before, during and after experiments in the classroom became the real tipping point of transformational change. Through these fortnightly gatherings, teachers inspired each other. New connections were established amongst colleagues across the Prep to Year 12 campus, and participants felt safe to discuss any challenges faced and also to celebrate successes.

Students were asked to reflect on their learning experiences – to consider what had surprised and delighted them and articulate what they now wondered. For the teachers, this demonstrated the students' knowledge and transfer of learning better than the completion of a paper-based task. One student commented how important communication between people of different ages and backgrounds was, when explaining concepts.

I began this article by noting that, throughout the pandemic, new words had become part of my everyday vocabulary. As Thompson Morrison explains:

We must find new vocabulary for these experiences as our existing vocabulary is limited by our past experiences.

New experiences need new words, words that can connect us with others who also have had similar experiences. By finding those words, we are able to weave those experiences into a new culture (Morrison, Fluke & Cunningham, 2020, p. 243).

In setting Woodcrest State College on a path of transformation, my vocabulary bank has expanded, with words taking on shared meanings in the context of agile practices and authentic learning. My focus to ensure quality teaching happens every day in every classroom throughout the college, remains steady. My teaching staff are committed to create a dynamic

learning culture, where classrooms are places that empower students to be active participants in the learning process and be curious enough about content to question and make connections that become meaningful.

My visit to Dayton High and subsequent coaching sessions with Thompson Morrison became essential catalysts for change within my school. Mine was a learning journey that not only enhanced my self-awareness and capability as an instructional, innovative leader, but also brought teachers together with a common purpose and enthusiasm they still feel months later. I continue to seek to expand my knowledge and understanding and to implement agile practices that will strengthen student engagement, provide opportunities for collaboration amongst peers and create authentic, personalised learning experiences for all our learners – students, teachers and leaders alike.

Figure 2.



The article's author (front row, third from right) with Principal Jami Fluke and English Language Development Teacher Jenni Shilhanek, from Dayton Junior High and High School, Director of Innovate Oregon, Thompson Morrison and members of the 2019 QASSP Study Tour to the US Pacific Northwest.



REFERENCES

Morrison, T, Fluke, J & Cunningham, W 2020, *The Dayton Experiment: How a public school in rural Oregon reimaged education, unleashed its students' creative potential, and became a model for the nation*, Prime Pattern Press, Portland, Oregon.