MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

WELCOME BACK!

Amy Lin

On behalf of the Learning Forward Ontario executive team, I would like to wish everyone a successful and relatively trouble-free start-up in your departments, schools or systems. Whether you have been a long-time member, a new member who attended one of our events last year, or someone who is interested in our organization,we appreciate you and your commitment to sustained professional learning to improve student success.

Our Board of Directors met in the summer and we are committed to providing you with new learning opportunities which we hope you will take part in. Our first event is coming up quickly and features the return of Dr. Douglas Fisher entitled "How to Create a Culture of Achievement". This will take place on October 21st, 2014 at the Chestnut Centre, downtown Toronto, and registration has started for this event. On February 9th, 2015, we will be hosting a full-day learning session with George Couros focused on "digital leadership". Check out his article in this newsletter. We will also be holding our annual spring conference with the theme of "making learning visible". We will continue to publish our Learning Forward Ontario newsletters with articles, interviews, and regular columns.

On October 21st at our first event in Toronto, we will be holding our Annual General Meeting. At this meeting we will be voting in our new executive. If you are interested in running for a board position, please contact us.

We will keep all of our latest news and registration information updated on our website. I look forward to seeing you at our events and please feel free to contact us at any time with your comments, ideas, and suggestions.

Sign up now!

Learning Forward Ontario's Fall Event featuring Dr. Douglas Fisher will be held on **October 21st, 2014 at the Chestnut Conference Centre in downtown Toronto.**

See inside for more information.

What "Digital" Accelerates

by George Couros

George Couros is a Division Principal for Parkland School Division and an Innovative Teaching, Learning, and Leadership Consultant. You can contact George at georgecouros@gmail.com.

The term is thrown around in circles often and it is something that I have focused on in my work with students. What I concluded around the term was "the opportunity to use technologies to make a significant impact on the lives of others." In schools, we have focused on the notion of "digital citizenship" for years, but the term seems to be very neutral. In reality, if I live in a city I am a citizen in that area. Is talking about the mere existence of "being online" enough for our students? Are we really setting high expectations or as educators, have we set a rather low bar for what our students do online because we are unsure of the space and how to use it ourselves? And really, is it "digital citizenship" anymore in a world where every single student in our school has grown up in a world with Internet?

Not settling for the "status quo", many administrators have jumped into the space to experiment themselves on how social media can make an impact in the work that they do in schools. Starting off as "citizens" in the space, many educators have played around with technologies to see how it could impact learning and relationships amongst both peers and students. The transition for many though has gone into the leadership space where they are sharing some of their learning in an open space to focus on making an impact on the lives of not only those students in their school and classroom, but helping teachers help students across the world. Although "Digital Leadership" has been a quote that has been used often in this type of work, the main components of leadership have not changed, but only amplified and accelerated. From experimenting myself and observing others, I have seen how "digital" has made a significant impact on not only the notion of leadership, but also the work that is underway in schools.

Accelerating Innovation

Innovation can simply be defined as doing things "better and different", yet it is often used to replace the term (mistakenly) for technology. Innovation and technology are not necessarily synonymous although some organizations simply replace the word "edtech" with "innovation" in job titles, without really changing job descriptions. Innovation is a human endeavour and is really more about a way of thinking than it is about the "stuff". Yet, the way we use technology now can really accelerate the process of innovation in schools and districts.

Two key components that are necessary to innovation are networks and remix. Great teachers have done this for years without social media, but with the ability to now connect with people all over the world, innovation can definitely be amplified. Networks are crucial to innovation, because they increase the ability to learn and share ideas with people. Concentrations of people in a specific area (known as "spikes") already exist in our world. In North America, if you want to be a movie star, where do you go? If you want to become a country singer, where do you go? If you answered "Hollywood" and "Nashville" (in that order), you have identified a "spike".

So where do "spikes" exist in education? Until now, there has been no real place since schools are all over the world. But with the thoughtful use of social media by educators all over the world, "spikes" have been created through a ton of teachers connecting through mediums such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google Plus. These types of networks are crucial to this accelerated growth and though often people complain that they can become an "echo chamber", the changes and iterations to many ideas are really creating some great ideas that are impacting education. Things such as "Genius Hour", which gives students the time to explore and create based on their own passions (paraphrased), are going viral, and although there are many that would suggest this type of learning should be the norm for the majority of time in our schools, implementing some of these ideas in small steps, are usually crucial to major changes.

As Chris Kennedy stated in his recent *#LeadershipDay14* post, "you cannot microwave change". That being said, change can happen a lot quicker now than it has before. This social sharing through these vast networks has been the spark for many great ideas.

That is where remix comes in.

Again, great teachers have always done this, but now they just have a greater opportunity and community to tap into. Finding the idea is one thing, but making it applicable and work for your community, situation, and more importantly, your students' needs, is where this is crucial. Seeing Josh Stumpenhorst share the idea of "Innovation Day" in Illinois, I watched as Jesse McLean made it into "Innovation Week" within Parkland School Division in Alberta. Remixes and iterations of this day/week, have been shared, remixed, and made applicable to kids of all ages all over the world.

The network is where the information has been found, but the ability to remix it for your own context is where innovation happens. This becomes a massive game of "telephone" where the idea starts off one way, but by the time it ends up in a specific spot, it could look totally different.

A Flattened Organization

This used to be done in our schools through an administrator seeing a great practice in a classroom, having the teacher share it in a staff meeting, and then others implement it in a way that they have seen makes sense for their students. It worked, but it was a much slower process and often relied on teachers being empowered to shared by their administrators. What "digital" provides is often an instant look into the classroom without waiting for those "once-in-awhile" meetings.

In my first year of leadership, I remember one of my mentor principals had shared how she believed that she was a better teacher now as a principal because she saw teachers "teach" all of the time through visiting their classroom. I made this something that I implemented often in my work as an administrator, but my instructional leadership alone could only go so far. I wanted other teachers to see what I saw.

Having teachers watch other teachers in action is probably the best professional development any educator could get, but the reality is that because of time, space, and funds, this opportunity is often limited. What I wanted to see was the teachers creating this visibility into their classrooms through the use of social spaces. Instead of waiting for the meeting, a teacher can simply blog, create a video, or even tweet ideas of things that are happening in their classrooms.

This "visible learning" shared by the teacher shows that learning and leadership can come from anywhere within your school. Many leaders have challenged this idea with the reasoning that teachers should "just talk to each other" and that digital shouldn't replace that. From what I have seen, it has actually been the opposite. Conversations are often initiated from these "quick shares" that go on in the staff room, or after school. I have seen greater face-to-face connections because of this sharing, not only at the school level, but at the district level as well. It also shows that anyone can learn from anyone; the kindergarten teacher can make an impact on the principal, and vice-versa.

When we truly flatten our organizations this way, it makes us all better because we not only better appreciate one another, but we tap into the "wisdom of the room". We can do a lot more together than we ever could do apart.

Empowering Voice

There are many things wrong in the world of education today. Initiatives are often changed and it seems politicians are more concerned with "making a name" than "making a difference". Traditional media has also hurt education in many ways by focusing on the bad stories that come out of school, rather than the good. It is not the idea that as educators we need to speak up now more than ever; education has always been in need of good public relations. It is just now the opportunities to share our voice are numerous, and we need to take advantage.

Through the constant sharing of not only what happens in school, but the way things are changing, we have the ability to not only connect on a global scale, but also locally. When I grew up, the sole concern of my parents was safety, but with a mass sharing of knowledge comes a higher expectation from the public. The more we are informed, the more we expect. It is human nature for not only education, but for all organizations. This, in my opinion, is so positive to what we are trying to do with schools.

School websites have often shared things such as sporting events or concerts at schools, but they have not focused on conversations with our community. As many schools are trying to move forward in a much different time than many of us grew up in, it is essential that we not only share what is happening in our schools, but engage in true, two-way conversations with our communities. The more parents are brought into the learning that is happening in the classroom, the more likely their children will be successful. We have an opportunity to not only share our voice as educators, but we have many more avenues to hear the voices of our community, and more importantly, our students.

For example, Leyden High Schools, located in a suburb of Chicago, has recently turned over their Twitter account to an individual student in their school, one week at a time (found at twitter.com/LeydenPride). You are able to hear the experience of students in the school from their viewpoint, not the view of a school that is trying to "brand" it's message. What this school has displayed (on several occasions) is that a school is defined by the experience the students have, and that they should not only engage them in conversation, but empower their kids to share their voice openly. They are not focusing on developing the "leaders for tomorrow", but by empowering student voice right now they are developing the leaders of today. Any great leader knows that their legacy is not defined by creating followers, but by developing leaders.

Empowering our teachers to share their voice and open the doors to what they do in the classroom also gives our community a new perspective on what it is to be an educator, and how we are willing to go above and beyond for our kids. There are bad teachers in schools. You will find this to be true in any profession. Yet those teachers are in the minority, while the stories that were shared about them, through the media, were in the majority. What has changed is that many of our great educators are changing the narrative by sharing the incredible work that they are doing with students.

Unfortunately, there is still the mindset in many organizations that administrators need to "control" the story that is sent out about their schools. The feeling is that with every blog post, tweet, website, etc., approval must be obtained before it is shared. This is not leadership. Our job is to not control talent, but to unleash it. If you hired the teacher to work with children in a classroom, shouldn't we be able to trust them to send out a tweet?

A teacher sharing their voice publicly is often deemed risky. Although there are pitfalls and negatives that can happen, the positive far outweigh the negatives. As leaders, we can not simply ask our teachers to take a risk and share their voice with others, but model it ourselves. Often we promote that our staff "take risks", but unless they are willing to see their leader "put themselves out there", they feel it is not a chance that they are willing to take. Through these stories from our schools, we make a connection with people that "data and numbers" simply cannot convey. Stories from the classroom are the ones that touch the hearts of our communities and other educators, and often lead to meaningful change.

Our voice as an education community is more important now than ever. How are you as a leader empowering others to share their voice?

Concluding Thoughts

The main components of leadership have not changed in the past few years because of the "digital revolution", nor will they change in the future. Perhaps we just have a better understanding of the definition of "leadership" and how it differs from "management" (although both are crucial components to successfully leading an organization). The difference digital makes is that we can accelerate, amplify, and empower in a way that we couldn't before. Great leaders take advantage of every opportunity in front of them so that they can empower those that they serve. Cale Birk, a principal in Kamloops, BC, recently said that "better is not easier"; as leaders, we shouldn't be looking for an easy way out. This work is tough, but the most important element is not necessarily where we are, but that we are moving forward.

It is pretty easy to say "do this", but it is much better and more valuable to say "let's do this together". If we can show that as leaders we are willing to embrace change and jump into many of these new opportunities for learning with our communities, the impact we can make not only with our staff, but more importantly, our students, could be monumental. ∎

TEACHING IN A *Whole New World*

Imagine a world in which every teacher began her day singing the lyrics from Aladdin:

I can show you the world
Shining, shimmering, splendid...
I can open your eyes
Take you wonder by wonder
Over, sideways and under
On a magic carpet ride
A whole new world

A new fantastic point of view
No one to tell [you] no
Or where to go
Or say [you're] only dreaming
A whole new world

A dazzling place [you] never knew
But when [you're] way up here
It's crystal clear
That now I'm in a whole new world with you
Now I'm in a whole new world with you

Unbelievable sights
Indescribable feeling
Soaring, tumbling, freewheeling
Through an endless diamond sky
A whole new world

Don't you dare close your eyes
A hundred thousand things to see
Hold your breath - it gets better
I'm like a shooting star
I've come so far
I can't go back to where I used to be
A whole new world

Every turn a surprise
With new horizons to pursue...
There's time to spare
Let me share this whole new world with you
A whole new world
That's where we'll be
For you and me
It's a whole new world

by Lori Lisi

Lori Lisi is the Coordinator of Secondary Programs at the York Catholic District School Board. She has worked in education for the last 28 years in various roles: Elementary School Teacher, Secondary School English Teacher, Dean of Secondary School Library and Information Centre, and Secondary Literacy Program Resource Teacher. She has been a writer, literacy consultant, and reviewer in the publishing world and has worked collaboratively on various Ontario Ministry of Education initiatives and the creation of teacher resources. Lori holds a Masters of Education Degree in Literacy and an Honours Specialist Degree in both Modern Languages and English Literature. Lori lives with her husband and two children in York Region, Ontario.

It never seizes to amaze me that when a group of educators gather in a room, it is transformed into a magical world of wonder, or is it? The song lyrics from Aladdin describes what I felt when I first entered the wonderful world of teaching. My excitement was infectious and my commitment and dedication to helping kids learn was always driven by my passion to empower students and to stimulate their imagination. I never 'named' my craft. I never thought about barriers that might impede my journey or the journey of my students. My naiveté was the fuel that thrust us into orbit. My ingenuous intentions strengthened my ability to afford learning to happen in my classroom. Was I jaded by the myths that kept surfacing like spot fires in a forest? No, not I... I would overcome all obstacles and leap tall building in a single bound... I was super teacher! But the costume got harder to put on because the phone booths got harder to find. Contrary to the myths that surrounded me about learning and literacy, my students and I would survive... one year at a time.

The mainstream discourse that echoed within the halls didn't always serve my students, so I had to find ways to engage them and help them to understand that their discourse had a place in my classroom and that they should expect it to have a place in every classroom. If learning

is, as has been echoed by numerous expects, a 'social phenomenon', then it is our obligation to foster an environment in our classrooms that affords students to learn not simply by passively listening to formal instruction, but more importantly to learn by engaging in reading and writing with others, and becoming catalysts for social action. For this to happen, my middle-class discourse will have to be open to the discourses of my students' and only then will they be provided the key to enter the wonderful world of learning. Was I aware of the impact of this decision? Perhaps not, but I did it intentionally. And it is for that reason that I am a firm believer of explicit teaching and learning.

According to education experts, this wonderful world of education is filled with so many myths about literacy and learning that the sky becomes cloudy and the horizons diminish. It becomes incumbent upon us, as educators, to dispel those myths and encourage our students to use their imagination as a vehicle to exercise their personal power and engage in social action, for as Allan Luke says: "literacy teaching is always first and foremost a social practice, one that is constrained and enabled by the changing economics and politics of schooling and communities." Teaching reading and writing isn't only done using one method. There are numerous methods within the education world that claim to be the 'answer' to the debate on how best to teach reading and writing. In my early teaching years, I thought that the method that the principal at my school prescribed as the method of teaching reading and writing would cure the 'problem' of those students who just 'didn't get it'. How very naïve was I to think that we could exorcise the disengagement out of our students by excluding them from their peers and forcing them to follow one program that disadvantaged them before they had even begun. Such thinking was founded on the premise that all students are the same and *therein lies the rub*, as Shakespeare put it. There is not one program that will work for all students. It's not just about teaching and learning in 'context', but rather how to teach and learn so that students can respond to the changing 'contexts' in which they find themselves. It is all about *a whole new world*.

I will tenaciously continue in my capacity as a teacher, a curriculum coordinator and a member of society to hone in on literacy as a social practice, because students don't learn to read and write from my instruction, but rather from my actions. What I do, what I say, and what and how I read and write will impact my students more than the lesson on conjugating verbs. I will pay attention to the social, cultural and economic aspects of the journey that fails our disenfranchised students, over and over, and I will forever be grateful for having had my convictions challenged to the point of discomfort, for it has afforded me the good sense to be more critical in my approach to teaching reading and writing, and realizing that it's never a fait accompli. ∎

USING ICEBREAKERS IN

Professional Learning Sessions

by Brian Weishar

*Brian Weishar is a Provincial Literacy Lead with Literacy GAINS and a
Secondary Curriculum Consultant with the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic DSB.*

As a participant in professional learning sessions, I have seen a lot of icebreakers used as a way to begin a day. Although these activities are not be the most essential thing a participant takes away from a session, as a professional learning facilitator, I have come to understand the importance of using these to open a professional learning session. I think icebreakers can be ways to set participants at ease, to provide the context for both the professional learning and about the people they will be working and learning with, and to build community within the group.

I also think that the activity needs to be efficient. Firstly, it needs to be time efficient; that is, it sets the stage without it taking a great deal of time, both to explain and set up with participants and for them to engage in the activity. Secondly, it needs to be 'content efficient'. Here, I mean that it should help participants transition into the work of the session as a whole without introducing ideas that might distract or unintentionally overshadow the day, and that the activity has some cohesion with the goals and purposes of the session.

Recently, I developed an icebreaker activity to begin a session. The participants attending the session were from a variety of roles, including classroom educators and directors of education, and their task was to provide advice about adolescent literacy learning.

This activity asked participants in their table groups to construct bar graphs, using sticky notes and chart paper, to represent either something about themselves and/or something about their thinking. The discussions around each bar graph provided a way for participants to introduce themselves at their table groups, and each bar graph itself provided a quick representation for me as a facilitator as well as showing the whole group something about their experience and/or thinking.

SET UP

Each table group was provided with a piece of chart paper and a stack of sticky notes. The 3x3 size sticky notes work well because they create bar graphs which are easily visible across the room. On each piece of chart paper, I already drew a line representing the horizontal axis of a bar graph (to save some time and so that all the chart papers had the same orientation when they were displayed). The line was divided into six segments representing potential categories related to the questions I posed.

On a slide, I posted a question for discussion, a line for the horizontal axis similar to the one on their chart paper, and the labels for each of the categories related to the question below the axis. Participants did not need to write down the labels of the categories since they could refer to the slide and they would re-use the chart paper for subsequent questions; however, some groups found it useful to use additional sticky notes for those labels to make it easier to refer to them right on the chart paper.
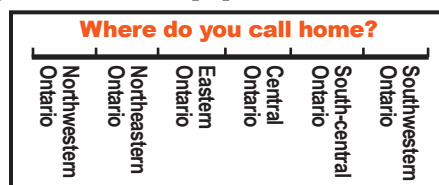
TOPIC QUESTIONS

I deliberately chose questions that moved from topics related closely to participants (e.g., Where do you call home?) to topics related to the work of the session (e.g., Which quotation [related to adolescent literacy learning] resonates most with you?).
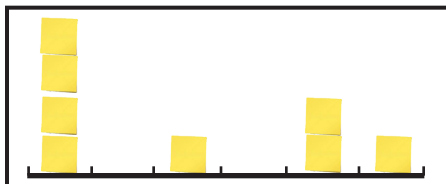
Each question had relevance, and for each question I had a couple of purposes in mind. For example, the question, "Where do you call home?" gave participants, who represented all regions of Ontario, a way of indicating where they were from, but it also provided a way to highlight the contexts that people bring to the group. In this case, discussing the realities of adolescent literacy learning in Northern Ontario might include factors that are different than in Southwestern Ontario for example.

I thought about how each of the questions can be a way for people to get to know one another, and to reveal various perspectives people were bringing to the work of the day.

THE PROCESS

Each question was posted, one by one, on a slide. For each question, groups responded to the question, put one sticky note per person on each of the bar graph categories that applied to create their table group bar graph. When groups were ready, I asked representatives from each group to simply hold up their bar graph so it could be seen by all members of the larger group. Explanations from each of the table groups were mostly not necessary, but it may be an opportunity to point out any trends or anomalies. As a facilitator, I took an opportunity to link the topic of the bar graph to the larger purpose of the day.

Once the quick debrief was concluded, table groups cleared their sticky notes to be re-used, and a new question was posted to repeat the process again. ∎
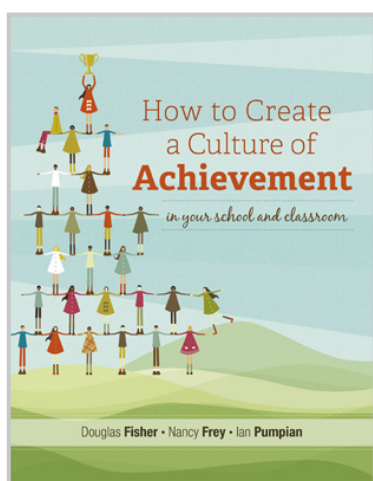
Learning Forward Ontario's FALL EVENT

How to Create a Culture of Achievement

Tuesday, October 21, 2014
9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Chestnut Conference Centre
Toronto, Ontario

The Chestnut Conference Centre is located adjacent to the city landmark of Yonge and Dundas Square, directly north of the city's Financial District in the heart of the downtown core.

Dr. Douglas Fisher

What does it feel like to walk into your school? Is it a welcoming place where everyone feels valued? Most school improvement efforts focus on academic goals. But what makes or breaks your learning community are the intangibles - the relationships and connections that make up its culture. No school improvement effort will be effective unless school culture is addressed. In this session, we focus on five pillars that are critical to building a culture of achievement:

1 WELCOME

Imagine if all staff members in your school considered it their job to make every student, parent, and visitor feel noticed, welcomed, and valued.

2 DO NO HARM

Your school rules should be tools for teaching students to become the moral and ethical citizens you expect them to be.

3 CHOICE WORDS

When the language students hear helps them tell a story about themselves that is one of possibility and potential, students perform in ways that are consistent with that belief.

4 IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO LEARN

Can you push students to go beyond the minimum needed to get by, to discover what they are capable of achieving?

5 BEST SCHOOL IN THE UNIVERSE

Is your school the best place to teach and learn? The best place to work?

REGISTRATION FEE: $185.00

Registration fee includes a full day session, continental breakfast, lunch, snacks, and a copy of the book, *How to Create a Culture of Achievement in Your School and Classroom*.

Registration and breakfast begins at 8:30 a.m.

Parking is available for a small additional cost at the Chestnut Centre.

Go to **http://learningforwardontario.ca/events.html** to register!

Payment can be made by **CREDIT CARD**, **CHEQUE** or **PURCHASE ORDER**. Begin by visiting **http://learningforwardontario.ca/events.html** to access the registration form. If you are paying by mail or purchase order, complete and print the online registration form and mail it along with your cheque or purchase order to:

Attention: Jennifer Canning
Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB
1994 Fisher Dr.
Peterborough, ON K9J 6X6

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Learning Forward Ontario's FALL EVENT

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Located adjacent to the city landmark of Yonge and Dundas Square and directly north of the city's Financial District, Chestnut Conference Centre is in the heart of the downtown core.

Learning Forward Ontario is holding its Annual General Meeting on October 21st from 12:00 p.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Chestnut Conference Center.

There are three Director-at-large positions available.

If you are interested in joining our Board, please attend or email:

inquiries@learningforwardontario.ca

Don't miss out!

Douglas Fisher, Ph.D., is a Professor of Language and Literacy Education in the Department of Teacher Education at San Diego State University and a classroom teacher at Health Sciences High and Middle College. He is the author of several books, including *Checking for Understanding*, *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching*, and *Improving Adolescent Literacy*.

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