I was fortunate to attend this residential course offered by the Harvard Graduate School of Education during the June/July holidays in 2016. I was looking for a professional learning opportunity that would engage me in thinking more deeply and critically about my role. This program has a strong reputation, is marketed as very competitive entry so you have to feel good if you get accepted, right?

The program did not disappoint. I found it personally and professionally very rewarding, exhilarating even. It was intensive; remaining engaged and focussed for seven days straight left me a bit mentally fatigued at the end. Luckily I had time for a bit of R&R in Boston before heading home.
PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The program promised quite a bit and it delivered. The overview for the program promised the following. Today’s school leaders struggle to balance their roles as instructional leaders with the many other demands of the job. Through Improving Schools: The Art of Leadership, participants will develop their leadership skills, efficacy and ability to support teacher development and student achievement. Participants will also expand their understanding of leadership and explore multiple approaches for addressing leadership challenges.

The program will help you identify areas of school improvement, establish priorities, develop strategies and build a base of support around a change initiative. You will explore successful models for school improvement, learn how to lead and manage change, and understand how to implement curriculum innovation.

Through a research-based curriculum, you will focus on effective supervision and evaluation, approaches to solving leadership challenges with an emphasis on U.S. settings, and proven strategies that support teaching and learning. Upon completion of the program, you will have examined your own leadership challenge in the context of instructional improvement and learned how to lead and manage your school more effectively.

THEMES AND SESSIONS

The program was not a ‘sit and look interested while experts speak at you’ experience. It was deliberately structured around a number of evolving themes to ensure we get to know a range of people from different educational contexts and cultures and deepen our understanding of issues and concepts to help address a workplace challenge. As part of the application process we were asked to articulate a workplace challenge and how we expected to engage with it. Over the course of the seven days we worked in a small group to help each other break down the challenge into key parts and develop appropriate strategies.

The themes for each day were as follows:

Day 1: Adopting An Adaptive Leadership Stance
Day 2: Expanding Team Building Capacity Through Experiential Learning
Day 3: Reflecting On Self As A Leader
Day 4: Using Data To Focus Leadership Priorities
Day 5: Leading The Teaching Community In Continuous Improvement
Day 6: Strengthening Communities Of Practice
Day 7: Creating A Culture Of Hope
The sessions supporting the themes were as follow and I will give a summary of the more pertinent ones below:

- Leading Inclusion by Bill Henderson
- Including Ourselves in the Improvement Equation by Robert Kegan
- Leading Teams by Monica Higgins
- The Impact of Efficacy on Student Achievement by Jeff Howard
- Leading Educators in Using Data Wisely by Kathryn Boudett
- Teacher Supervision and Evaluation by Kim Marshall
- School Improvement through Writing Across the Curriculum by John Collins
- Professional Learning Communities by Pamela Mason
- Graduating Students from Book Poor Homes by Samuel Betances
- New England Clambake featuring various craft beers.

**LEADING INCLUSION BY BILL HENDERSON**

Bill is a currently principal of a large multi-racial K-12 school in Boston and happens to be vision challenged. He described how he became vision challenged (blind) then became a principal of a mainstream school and then developed an inclusive school that operates under the charter school system.

He focussed on the concept of ‘rich inclusion’ for students with disabilities. This is characterised by meaningful participation, successful performance and highlighting strengths and positives rather than what students can’t do. Rich inclusion is supported by strong student teacher relationships, deliberate teacher instruction, a focus on collaboration among students and teachers and asking for help when needed.

He challenged teachers to think of students with ‘diffabilities’ (different abilities) rather than students with disabilities and advocated for maintaining high expectations for all students yet prefaced this with being sensitive to the person and situation. High expectations with sensitivity for students had a nice resonance with me.

Bill shared his personal journey and challenges to becoming principal of an inclusive school in Boston, the many challenges he faced and people who doubted him and his abilities. He challenged us though to not run away from the doubt all leaders experience and are constantly exposed to. Rather, develop a bit of grit and get on with the role!

**ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP BY IRMA TYLER-WOOD**

This session focused on understanding how adaptive leadership can help schools flourish. Adaptive leadership focuses on leadership as a practice, to be used in situations without known solutions. Schools operate in a very different environment from 20 years ago yet many of the structures and routines in schools mirror what was successful 20 years ago. Coping with the
complexity of the present means we need to be brave enough to critically reflect and be prepared to try new things that don’t come with a guarantee of success.

Adaptive challenges are those where there is ‘a gap between aspirations and operational capacity that cannot be closed by the expertise and procedures currently in place’ (Tyler-Wood). They have no ready answers and require changes to mindset rather than skillset.

Adaptive change is uncomfortable; it challenges our most deeply held beliefs and suggests that deeply held values are losing relevance, bringing to the surface legitimate but competing perspectives or commitments. This means that adaptive challenges require a different form of leadership behaviour: adaptive leaders do not provide the answers (and do not equate leadership with expertise) and accept that a degree of disequilibrium is needed to sustain adaptive change (rather than minimising conflict and discomfort).

In summary, adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and to thrive. It supports a ‘distributed leadership’ model, which means leadership can be displayed by people across an organisation, not only by those in senior positions or management roles.

INCLUDING OURSELVES IN THE IMPROVEMENT EQUATION BY ROBERT KEGAN

Dr Kegan spoke about the difficulty of the change process and sustaining it over time. This presenter was a bit of a ‘rock star’. He was well known to the audience and his delivery was exceptional, he spoke for nearly two hours yet had me hanging on every word.

He started with a classic video (Just Stop It by Bob Newheart, on youtube) and highlighted how most versions of improvement processes tend to focus on the theme of stopping a behaviour. He argues this reflects a technical approach to change, getting people to stop certain behaviours and take on new ones. This is difficult to sustain as it relies on will power, dieting is a good example.

Rather, we need to understand how change can be very threatening and can trigger very strong emotional reactions, particularly if the change is seen to threaten status, certainty about our role, our autonomy, relationships and sense of fairness. All change involves loss, leaders are asked to help guide people through the process, the grieving for the past yet the challenge and excitement for the future. Recognising, understanding and working with the emotional vulnerabilities people experience during a change episode is a key aspect of supporting change in an organisation and is a crucial skill displayed by adaptive leaders.

LEADING TEAMS BY MONICA HIGGINS

During this session we analysed a case study to highlight a few lessons in leadership. The case study focused on the Everest Disaster in 1996 where 15 people died, and the role of the lead guides, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer (refer Appendix A).

To sum up, everyone was critical of the motivation, leadership and decision making of the lead guides and it is easy to be critical when sitting in a comfortable lecture theatre. However, some of the insights developed were quite valuable for school leaders. When leading teams pay attention to the following:
• Real and perceived hierarchy and how it hampers or encourages people to contribute.
• Be conscious of established goals and allow flexibility to adjust if needed (try to avoid the sunk cost effect, summit fever!).
• How the team is travelling.
• The environment you are operating in. How is the weather? Is anything changing? (Like the metaphor?).
• Trust and respect is critical to the success of teams.

TEACHER SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION BY KIM MARSHALL

Teacher supervision and evaluation is big in the States and can be high stakes for a teacher’s continuing employment. Principals are directed by district supervisors to constantly do the rounds, reviewing what the teachers are doing as the prime motivator to improving teaching and learning. Endless checklists, rubrics for performance and conferencing supported this yet with very little impact. The terminology used is a bit ordinary, reducing teaching to a seemingly mechanical, automatic operation yet there was some wisdom inherent.

Marshall’s presentation focused on the challenge for schools to get more good teaching into more classrooms more of the time. To think of the quality of the total teacher input into the teaching and learning space not just what one or two of the best teachers do. He argues the quality of teaching varies widely across each school, across the year. He challenged school leaders to consider why this happens, why wouldn’t a school want all their teachers to be the best they possibly can be and be consistent with their teaching throughout the year?

Marshall argues that effective supervision and evaluation needs to focus on whether students are learning and how teaching can be continuously improved. He provided five ways for this to happen;

1. Short, frequent, unannounced mini-observations with face-to-face feedback conversations with each teacher followed by a very brief write up (10 times in the year).
2. Input from students via well-constructed student perception surveys (twice a year).
3. Teachers working in teams to backwards design high quality curriculum units.
4. Teachers working in teams to analyse and follow up on student assessment results.
5. Evaluation rubric to sum up each teachers performance at the end of the year (refer appendix B).

Marshall concluded his session with a quote from Michael Fullan (2003):

“Nothing undermines the motivation of hard working teachers’ more than poor performance in other teachers being ignored over long periods of time. Not only do poor-performing teachers negatively affect the students in their classes, but they also have a spillover effect by poisoning the overall climate of the school”.
This session resonated with me as a challenge all schools face is how to continue to develop and ensure a consistent, high quality teaching and learning experience for all students across the school. We can directly influence the quality of teaching and consistency across the school through the implementation of the professional standards model, the continuing work of the teaching and learning committee and the Peer to Peer program.

**SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM BY DR JOHN COLLINS**

Dr Collins opened his session by quoting from the research by Peter Vail (The Purpose of High-Performing Systems: 1982); leaders in high performing systems focus passionately on a few key issues, they can't afford to be distracted by numerous issues. Collins argues that schools need to be high performing systems and one crucial area to focus on is improving student writing.

This is quite important for the American system as students (and ultimately schools) were now being assessed against what they term the national common core standards. These standards include a strong focus on standards of writing as well as reading and mathematics.

Collins’ program focuses on improving what he calls the academic press of students, for us this represents the persuasive/argumentative genre of writing. I believe our students are very familiar with this style but this doesn’t seem to be the case across the States. The beauty of the program is how it identifies five types of writing, makes clear how students can practice these types across all subjects they study and how teachers can implement these types in their subject area in meaningful and efficient ways. Collins presented research showing how this program has resulted in improved academic performance for students across the spectrum of socio-economic and cultural groups. (Refer to Appendix C for the Five Types of Writing).

The program and what it offers impressed me, particularly in the following areas:

1. All teachers can implement it across all subjects, not just the domain of the English/Humanities team.
2. It is an easy system for students to practice and develop expertise with. I see this as quite beneficial for our Year 7-9 students.
3. It is time efficient. All writing practice is performed under timed conditions and students do the ‘marking’ (peer review, teachers collect and quickly review to see how the students are progressing).
4. I recommend we follow up with the program as Dr Collins is coming to Queensland in February 2016 and it would be worthwhile having a small number of staff trained in the program.

**STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE BY DR PAMELA MASON**

This session was presented by Pamela Mason, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, a very dynamic and gifted presenter. Dr Mason illustrated how by establishing and supporting professional learning communities within schools leads to improved student learning
and is an intentional act on the part of school leaders. One standard for effective school leadership is a positive school culture that encourages collaboration among adults in the service of improving student learning and reflects in improved student achievement. Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been established in many schools to meet this standard. As with other school reform initiatives, PLCs require the active engagement and support of the school leader.

A PLC can be defined as a community of professionals that strive to improve in all facets of their practice. A school can be made up on a number of different types of communities of practice but all have the common elements of being focused on teaching practice, characterised by a culture of collaboration, are inclusive of all students and improving student learning, have clear expectations and protocols about behaviour and interactions, are genuine and ongoing.

Dr Mason's review of the research established that the professional learning community process provides the best environment for powerful professional development for teachers and that the best professional development builds staff capacity to function as members of a high-performing team.

In summary, effective professional development is:

- Ongoing, with a sustained, rather than episodic and fragmented, focus.
- Collective, rather than individualistic.
- Job-embedded, with teachers learning as they engage in their daily work.
- Results-oriented, with activities directly linked to higher levels of student learning.
- Most effective in schools that function as professional learning communities.

The focus for the PLC is on how we can improve student learning. Don’t be confused with the phrase of trying to improve student outcomes, the approach is to harness the skills, professional knowledge and professional practice of educators to work collectively to improve student learning. This is about teachers deliberately discussing and sharing practices that are proven to enhance student learning. It is also about developing a deep understanding of what good teaching practice is and what it looks like across the school.

These communities of practice must be more than just support groups for adult commiseration, a forum for sharing war stories, or a platform for promoting personal preferences about instruction. If PLCs are to function as a powerful source of professional development, they must reflect what we know about best practice and leverage the professional knowledge of our experienced and successful teachers.

Some great quotes:

- School leadership; the job no one wants but everyone can do better.
- “Retired on duty”; teachers doing their job but that’s it, no meaning or passion in what they do.
- Words are noises pregnant with meaning.
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FROM THE COURSE

Being involved in the program was inspirational. Engaging with 192 other school leaders from all over the world was quite a special experience and the understanding that we all face similar challenges was in many ways. The program gave me a deeper understanding of a range of issues and strategies that can help improve student learning at Hillbrook.

Two particular areas I will focus on as a result of participation in the program are as follows:

- Strengthening our Peer2Peer (P2P) program. The American experience of active teacher supervision by school leaders, measured against numerous detailed rubrics of performance has not had the impact on improving student learning they had hoped. Rather, by leveraging the professional knowledge of our experienced teachers and strengthening our collaborative culture through our P2P program we can improve student learning in our school. The P2P program will help continue to develop and ensure a consistent, high quality teaching and learning experience for all students across the school.

- A focus on student writing in Years 7 to 9. I was impressed with the writing program outlined by Dr Collins. His program focuses on improving what he calls the academic press of students, for us this represents the persuasive/argumentative genre of writing. The beauty of the program is how it identifies five types of writing, makes clear how students can practice these types across all subjects they study and how teachers can implement these types in their subject area in meaningful and efficient ways. Collins presented research showing how this program has resulted in improved academic performance for students across the spectrum of socio-economic and cultural groups. Dr Collins is coming to Queensland in February 2016 and we have three staff attending the workshop.

In conclusion I wish to acknowledge and sincerely thank the School Leadership Team and the School Board with providing the opportunity for me to participate in this unique professional learning experience.

Craig Merritt
February 2016